

Art in America

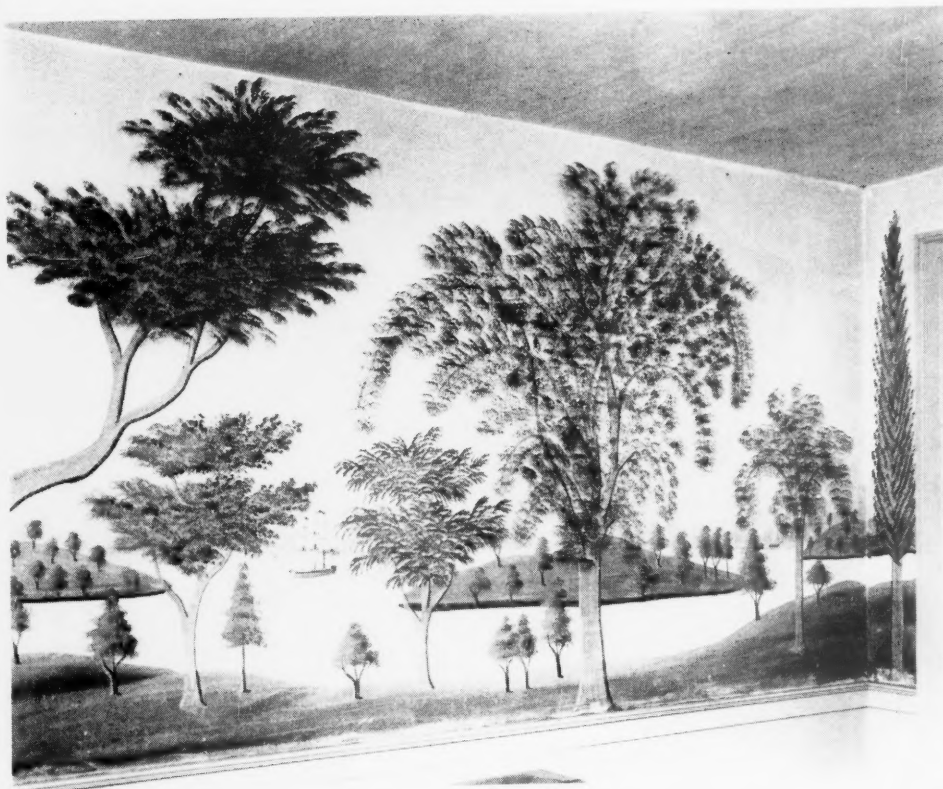
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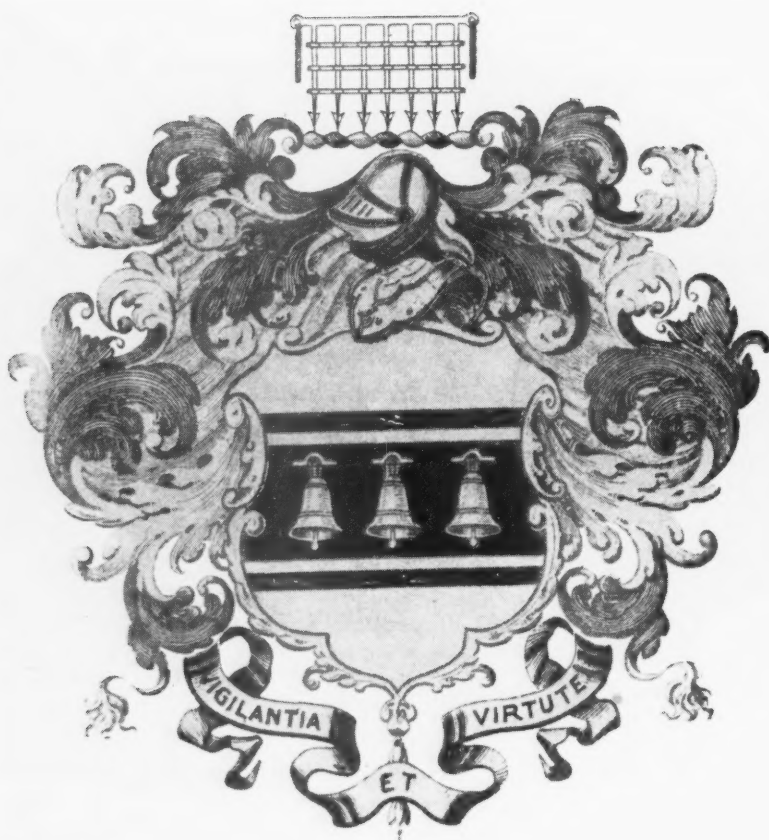
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Rufus Porter

Yankee Wall Painter



Porter

PORTER COAT OF ARMS
From the Porter Genealogy

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RUFUS PORTER

Yankee Wall Painter

By Jean Lipman

Cannondale, Connecticut

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Required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Art in America, published
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State of Massachusetts /
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Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Everett H. Pond, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher and Manager of ART IN AMERICA and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, to wit:

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Introduction

Rufus Porter's Life and Work

AMERICAN history is not made of dry dates and facts, but of the lives of our people. The way a great man lived and worked and thought is more than his personal story; it is the vital, living history of his time — a history we can ill afford to lose. Yet while the most insignificant dates and events in American history are recorded in thousands of volumes, many important lives have been entirely ignored. Such was that of Rufus Porter (1792-1884). His very name is almost unknown today and details of his amazing career have never been published or publicized. Yet this man was one of our great New Englanders. It has seemed important to reconstruct his life because he pioneered and made outstanding contributions in the field of American art, and in science and journalism as well. His career richly illustrates the most progressive tendencies of nineteenth-century America, and his life makes vividly clear the transition from the colonial period to our modern day.

Rufus Porter's place in American art history is that of our chief early mural painter and one of our great native artists. As a portrait painter he was the first to conceive of the large-scale production of portraits for the people; as a landscape painter he was the first to realize the popular possibilities of the everyday American scene. From the perspective of the twentieth century his homespun art and art instruction emerge as a highly significant facet of his many-sided career, and as an enduring contribution to American cultural history.

Porter's life reads almost like a composite tale of the times, a personal embodiment of the era of itinerant adventure, of young invention, of scientific, industrial, and artistic enterprise. We see a New England farmer's son and shoemaker's apprentice voyaging to the Hawaiian Islands, becoming America's leading mural painter, founding the *Scientific American* magazine, planning a "horseless carriage" and an airship designed to travel at a hundred miles an hour. In no other time or place than nineteenth-century America could such a life have been led.

Rufus Porter was born in West Boxford, Massachusetts, in 1792, the son of prosperous farmer folk. His higher education consisted of six months spent in the Fryeburg Academy in Maine at the age of twelve, and the next two years he lived as a farmer and amateur fiddler in Maine. Accord-

ing to an obituary account in the *Scientific American* his family decided when he was fifteen years old that "it would be best for him not to fiddle any longer for life" but to settle down to something solid and useful, and so apprenticed him to a shoemaker. Soon, however, he gave up this trade and began his itinerant career by walking to Portland where for three years he played the fife for military companies and the violin for dancing parties. He then became, successively, a house and sign painter, a painter of gunboats, sleighs, and drums, a drummer, and a teacher of drumming and drum painting. In 1814 he was, briefly, a member of the Portland Light Infantry. Next he taught school, built wind-driven grist mills, planned and copyrighted a music book, married, moved from Portland to New Haven, and began his career of portrait painting. Shortly after that we find him as "Professor Porter" running a dancing school. The following years, from 1817 to 1819, he seems to have been a member of the crew of a ship engaged on a trading voyage to the northwest coast and Hawaii.

Such was the youth of our young Jack-of-all-trades — the very spirit of freedom and adventure, trying out for himself a string of promising enterprises. He had the exuberant optimism of his time, the confidence in progress. Young, eager, welcoming change, he cheerfully assumed that anything was possible in the America of his day — and so it was! From shoemaker to fiddler, soldier, teacher, painter, sailor — a wealth of possibilities were open to this robust New England lad and opportunity was infinite.

Rufus Porter's father and grandfather and great-grandfather had owned and worked the same farm homestead in West Boxford. But young Rufus would have none of this dull, conservative régime. After trying out in rapid succession the various professions named he decided that no static life would suit him. In the early years of the new century he adopted the dual career of itinerant artist and inventor and so continued on the high-road of his free, adventurous life.

Rufus Porter carried the Yankee taste for itineracy to an extreme. He had begun a nomadic life when entering his teens, and he remained a wanderer till his last years, the highway his true home. A note in the *Porter Genealogy* published in 1878, when Rufus was eighty-six years old, reports: "Mr. Porter writes that he has good health, and walked seventeen miles the 3rd inst." He is evidently still footing it at eighty-six! At this date he is recorded as a resident of New Haven, but he had not yet settled down, and is found some years later in Bristol, Connecticut, where he spent his last years.

Among his minor claims to fame should be the title of America's most versatile and productive itinerant. In this role Rufus Porter devoted himself to the large-scale production of inexpensive portraits and murals, intended to adorn the homes and hostels of country folk. A generation before Messrs. Currier and Ives had become printmakers to the American people, Porter had established a mobile one-man factory for original portraiture and interior decoration.

From 1815 to 1824 he worked pretty steadily at the trade of itinerant portrait painting, traveling during that time as far south as Virginia and all through New England. To speed up production he planned and made a camera obscura with which he could make portraits in fifteen minutes. The silhouette of the sitter was focused on a sheet of paper, the outline then sketched and rapidly filled in. These portraits, priced at a dollar, were in great demand and sold like hot cakes.

In 1825 Porter published a book called *Curious Arts*, an art instruction book mainly designed to give the amateur public quick and easy recipes for various types of art work.

Included in this book is a section on "Landscape Painting on Walls of Rooms" — and for the next twenty years Porter devoted himself chiefly to mural painting. His frescoes were executed in large scale on the dry plaster walls in a combination of free-hand painting and stenciling, some in full color, others in monochrome, with foliage occasionally stamped in with a cork stopper instead of painted with a brush. These methods, as well as stencil work, had been used for decorating plaster, woodwork and furniture, but Rufus Porter was the first to popularize them for landscape painting. His rapid technique and stock stencils reveal our inventive Yankee introducing time-and-labor-saving devices and mass-production methods in art as he did in industry. His simple murals provided a popular substitute for the elaborate, imported scenic wallpapers that were fashionable at the time, and though somewhat related to wallpaper designs, Porter's scenes always have a fresh, native flavor.

In a series of articles published in the first volume of the *Scientific American* Porter discussed the mural painter's approach to his art. Here we find him enthusiastically recommending for subject matter, American farm scenery; for style, deliberate abstraction. This was indeed a revolutionary combination for a mid-nineteenth-century artist to have advanced. I quote:

There can be no scenery found in the world which presents a more gay and lively appearance in a painting, than an American farm, on a swell of land, and with vari-

ous colored fields well arranged . . . In finishing up landscape scenery, it is neither necessary nor expedient, in all cases, to imitate nature. There are a great variety of beautiful designs, which are easily and quickly produced with the brush, and which excel nature itself in picturesque brilliancy, and richly embellish the work though not in perfect imitation of anything.

Rufus Porter's outstanding trait was his total independence of the more conventional ideas and fashions of his day. He felt himself free to live as he would, to think as he would, to paint as he would. This accounts both for the bold originality of his ideas as an inventor and for his free approach to the art of painting. His awareness of the simple beauty of New England farms and villages, his dislike of academic realism, and his personal, deliberately abstract style, his unconventional designs and gay color schemes, his rapid, bold brushwork — all this adds up to a quite modern art. Porter was at the same time the most typically native and the most radically modern of the early American landscape artists.

During the years of Porter's work as an itinerant artist he actively practiced a subsidiary profession — that of inventor. His inventions were generally directed toward saving time and labor, and his liking for the itinerant life caused him to specialize in devices which would improve means of locomotion. He was actually the first to visualize the possibilities and to draw up specific plans for the automobile, the elevated train, and the passenger plane. Rufus Porter also concentrated on developing portable mechanisms and this adjective is prominent in the newspaper titles of his inventions. We find plans for "Porter's Portable Horse Power," a portable fence and portable boat, a pocket chair, and even a car for moving houses. There is nothing stodgy or static in Porter's scheme of things. He was a forward-looking devotee of variety, change, speed. His life, art, writings, and inventions are entirely consistent; all typify the changing trends of his times and predicate to an amazing degree our twentieth-century tempo.

Throughout his life Porter was interested not only in doing but in teaching. He had the instincts of the leader, the crusader, and sought at every turn to promote and propagate the ideas and skills which he developed. When in his youth he became an accomplished drummer and drum painter he also became a teacher of drumming and drum painting. In his early twenties he was a school teacher and a "professor" of dancing, and planned though never carried out a music instruction book. Throughout his career as an artist he was an active teacher, publishing a popular art primer, writing series of articles on the art of painting and working

with a small school of pupils who learned and practiced his methods of mural painting. A practical inventor, he was always aware of the broader implication of his ideas. After drawing up specifications for a high-speed flying machine he published in 1849, neatly timed for the gold rush, a book called *Ærial Navigation, the Practicability of Traveling Pleasantly and Safely from New York to California in Three Days*.

In the latter part of his life as a magazine editor and pamphleteer Rufus Porter sought to instruct and lead public opinion. The several scientific journals which he founded and edited discuss, besides scientific material, everything from education to politics. His journals, representing the interests of mechanics and farmers, are boldly independent and progressive: the religious articles which he wrote and published in his later days can only be termed revolutionary. As journalist and so commentator on his times Porter in his mature years crystalized the ideals of freedom, equality and progress in the young democracy in which he had played so varied and active a part.

Chronology of Rufus Porter's Life

- 1792 Born May 1 in West Boxford, Massachusetts.
- 1796 Entered the Fifth District School in West Boxford.
- 1801 Moved with his family to Flintstown (Baldwin), Maine.
- 1804 Living with his family in Pleasant Mountain Gore, Maine.
November 8 entered Freyburg Academy, Maine, where remained six months.
- 1805-07 Farming, fiddling, and making various mechanisms in Pleasant Mountain Gore.
- 1807 Shoemaker's apprentice in West Boxford.
- 1807-10 Playing fife and fiddle in Portland, Maine.
- 1810-11 House and sign painter in Portland.
- 1812 Private in the Boxford West Parish company of foot soldiers.
May 25 drafted as a private from West Boxford to guard Atlantic seaboard.
Painting gunboats in Portland.
- 1813 In Denmark, Maine, painting sleighs and drums, playing drum, teaching drumming and drum painting.
- 1814 September 7 - November 25, Private and Musician in three Portland companies of the state militia.
- 1814-15 Teaching school in Baldwin and Waterford, Maine.
- 1815 Building wind-driven gristmills in Portland.
January 24 copyrighted title of music book, *The Martial Musician's Companion*.
October 16 married Eunice Twombly of Portland.
- 1816 Moved to New Haven, Connecticut.
Started portrait painting.
Conducting a dancing school in New Haven.
August 16 son, Stephen Twombly, born in Portland.
- 1817-19(?) Trading voyage to the Northwest Coast and Hawaii.
- 1818(?) Painting in Hawaii.
July 29 daughter, Mary Broadbury, born in Portland.
- 1819 Painting portraits in Boston after return from Hawaii.
Painted portraits of John and Mehetable Tyler in West Boxford.
- 1819-20 Traveling southward on foot painting portraits — from Boston, through New York and New Jersey, to Baltimore.
- 1820 August 9 son, Rufus King, born at Cambridge, Massachusetts.
In Alexandria, Virginia, made a camera obscura to facilitate portrait painting.
Traveling with camera and hand-cart, painting portraits, to Harrisonburg, Virginia.
Boring for source of perpetual heat at Harrisonburg Hot Springs.
Invented main features of his "aerial locomotive."
- 1821-22 Traveling northward painting portraits and inventing various mechanisms.
(Continued as part-time itinerant inventor and portrait painter till near end of life.)
- 1822 Invented and produced a revolving almanac.

- 1823 Traveling through New England with relative "Joe" as portrait painter.
Painting portraits in New York.
Worked on project of a horse-propelled twin boat in Hartford, Connecticut.
June 23 twin sons, Sylvanus Frederick and Francis Augustus, born in Billerica, Massachusetts, where Porter maintained legal residence from 1823 to 1843.
July 2 son, Francis Augustus, died in Billerica.
- 1823-24 Stagecoach trip to Philadelphia.
On foot from Philadelphia to New York as silhouette cutter.
Sold camera and tried itinerant landscape painting in New England.
- 1824 Began traveling through New England painting mural landscapes, which he continued on and off till c. 1845.
Built and sold a horse flat boat.
December 5 son, John Randolph, born in Billerica.
- 1825 Published *A Select Collection of Valuable and Curious Arts and Interesting Experiments* at Concord, New Hampshire.
Invented a successful cord-making machine at Billerica.
- 1827 July 31 son, Edward Leroy, born in Billerica.
- 1829 July 16 daughter, Nancy Adams, born in Billerica.
- 1831 July 19 daughter, Ellen Augusta, born in Billerica.
- 1832 Patented a clock.
- 1833 Constructed first model of his airship in Bristol, Connecticut.
- 1834 Published plans for its construction in *Mechanics Magazine*.
Patented a boat improvement.
October 1 son, Washington Irving, born in Billerica.
- 1835 Patented a floating dry dock and a self-adjusting cheese press.
- 1836 January 7 son, Washington Irving, died in Billerica.
Patented a distance measuring appliance, and a horse power mechanism.
- 1838 Patented a churn and a corn shelling machine.
Spent winter painting murals in Westwood, Massachusetts, and neighboring towns.
- 1840 Patented a life preserver, fire alarm, and cheese press.
Bought interest in the *New York Mechanic*.
- 1841-42 Publishing and editing the *New York Mechanic* (changed to *American Mechanic*) in New York. In this journal published his plans for the rotary plough, hot air ventilation system, "American Telegraph," etc. etc. and advertised his general patent agency run in connection with the paper.
- 1843 Learned and practiced electroplating.
- 1844 Invented a revolving rifle and sold it to Colonel Colt.
Joined the militia.
- 1845 Painting murals in Weymouth, Massachusetts.
- 1845-47 Publishing and editing the *Scientific American* in New York. In this journal published his plans for the elevated railroad, "steam-carriage for common roads," etc. etc.
- 1847 Constructed and publicly exhibited small working models of his airship in New York and Boston.

- 1847-48 Publishing and editing the *Scientific Mechanic* in New York and Washington.
- 1848 November 15 wife, Eunice Twombly Porter, died in Billerica where she had resided since 1823.
- 1849 Residing in New York City.
Married Emma Tallman Edgar of Roxbury, Massachusetts, in Brooklyn, New York.
Patented method of working the valves of auxiliary engines for feeding boilers.
Published *Aerial Navigation* in New York.
- 1850 October 6 son, Stephen T., died in Billerica.
Organized a stock company to promote his "aeropot," and shortly thereafter began construction of a full-sized machine, which was never successfully completed.
- 1851 January 23 petitioned Senate, 31st Congress, 2nd session, for appropriation to extend experiments in practical aviation.
- 1852 Published *Essential Truth* in Washington.
- 1852-53 Published and edited *Aerial Reporter* in Washington.
- 1853 Exhibited a 22-ft. working model of the aeropot at Carusi's Hall in Washington.
- 1854 Patented a cord-making machine and a cane-chair.
- 1855 Residing in Springfield, Massachusetts.
- c. 1855-65 Residing in Washington; after that time in Hartford and New Haven counties, Connecticut.
- 1856 Patented a purchasing machine and a fog whistle.
- 1857 Patented two automatic grain weighing machines.
- 1858 Patented a steam engine.
- 1859 Patented a blind fastener.
Son, Frank Rufus, born.
- 1861-63 Residing in Melrose, Massachusetts.
- 1861 Patented apparatus for elevating liquids by retained power.
- 1863 Patented an air pump.
- 1865 Residing in Malden, Massachusetts.
Patented a fan blower.
- 1869 Residing in New York City.
Making plans for construction of an improved aeropot.
- 1871 Residing in Bristol, Connecticut.
Patented a vise.
- 1872 Residing in Plantsville, Connecticut.
Writing on religious subjects.
Invented and sold a cam lever vise.
- 1878 Living on Water Street, West Haven, Connecticut.
Applied for and received pension as veteran of War of 1812.
- c. 1880-84 Again residing in Bristol, Connecticut.
- 1884 Visited his son in New Haven, Connecticut, and died there August 13.
Buried in Oak Grove Cemetery, West Haven, Connecticut.

Genealogical Data

RUFUS PORTER — painter, inventor, journalist.

Born: May 1, 1792, in West Boxford, Mass.

Married:

- (1) Oct. 16, 1815, Eunice Twombly of Portland, Me., daughter of Anna and Daniel Twombly of Falmouth, Me., who died Nov. 15, 1848 in Billerica, Mass.
- (2) 1849, Emma Tallman Edgar, daughter of Thomas Edgar and Ellen Cook of Roxbury, Mass., who died 1894.

Children by Eunice Twombly Porter:

- (1) Stephen Twombly, b. Aug. 16, 1816, in Portland, Me., d. Oct. 6, 1850, in Billerica, Mass. Assisted Rufus Porter as landscape painter and was partner in *American Mechanic* publication.
- (2) Mary Broadbury, b. July 29, 1818, in Portland.
- (3) Rufus King, b. Aug. 9, 1820, in Cambridge, Mass.
- (4) Sylvanus Frederick, b. June 29, 1823.
- (5) Francis Augustus, b. June 29, 1823; d. July 2, 1823.
- (6) John Randolph, b. Dec. 5, 1825, in Billerica, Mass.
- (7) Edward Leroy, b. July 31, 1827, in Billerica.
- (8) Nancy Adams, b. July 16, 1829, in Billerica.
- (9) Ellen Augusta, b. June 19, 1831, in Billerica.
- (10) Washington Irving, b. Oct. 1, 1834, in Billerica; d. Jan. 7, 1836 in Billerica.

Children by Emma Tallman Edgar Porter:

5 children, dates of birth unknown, who died in infancy. Frank Rufus, Painter, b. 1859, d. 1942 in Biloxi, Miss.

RUFUS PORTER'S BROTHERS AND SISTERS, all born in W. Boxford:

Ruth, b. 1780, d. 1846; m. Jonathan Poor of Baldwin (later Sebago), Me. Their son, Jonathan D. Poor, d. 1845, probably accompanied Rufus on one of his portrait painting trips and was the most active of the Porter-School mural painters.

Jonathan, b. 1782, d. 1854. Rufus was apprenticed to him as a shoemaker in 1807.

Tyler, b. 1784.

Stephen, b. 1788, d. 1851 in Portland, Me.

Henry, b. 1799, d. 1870 in Portland.

Benjamin, b. 1790. Resided for a time in Buxton, Me.; m. Sarah Runnels, second cousin of the Stephen Runnels who probably sailed with Rufus to Hawaii; their son named Stephen Runnels Porter.

HIS PARENTS:

Tyler Porter, carpenter and farmer, b. 1757 in W. Boxford, served as a private in the Revolutionary War, d. 1842 in Sebago, Me.

Abigail Johnson of Andover, Mass., m. Tyler Porter in 1779.

HIS PORTER UNCLES AND AUNTS, all born in W. Boxford:

Lydia, Mehitable; Mehitable the second; Lucy; Jonathan; Jonathan the second; Sarah; Ruth; Mary; Susanna; David Foster who removed to Denmark, Me.; Benjamin who removed to Winthrop, Me., in 1780 and then to Vienna, Me.,

in 1788. His daughter Caroline married the Jonathan Poor of Baldwin who after her death married Ruth Porter.

HIS PORTER GRANDPARENTS:

Benjamin Porter, carpenter and farmer, b. 1721 in W. Boxford, d. 1784 in W. Boxford. Married (1) 1744, Ruth Foster; (2) 1763, Mary Sherwine.
Ruth Foster of Andover, Mass., m. Benjamin Porter 1744, d. 1750.

HIS PORTER GREAT UNCLES AND AUNTS, all born in W. Boxford:

Mary; Thomas; Chadwick; Lucy; Sarah; Tyler; and Moses, who removed to Portland and whose son Aaron (1752-1837) married Pauline King, sister of the Hon. Rufus King after whom Rufus Porter named his second son. Their daughter Harriet married Rev. Lyman Beecher, was stepmother of Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

HIS PORTER GREAT-GRANDPARENTS:

Benjamin Porter, carpenter and farmer, b. 1692 in Wenham, Mass., married and established himself in W. Boxford in 1716, d. 1778 in W. Boxford.
Sarah Tyler, b. 1696 in W. Boxford, d. 1767 in W. Boxford, daughter of Moses and Ruth (Perley) Tyler of W. Boxford.

HIS PORTER GREAT-GREAT GRANDPARENTS:

John Porter of Wenham, Mass., malster and farmer, 1658-1753.
Lydia Herrick of Beverly, Mass., d. 1689.

HIS PORTER GREAT-GREAT-GREAT GRANDPARENTS:

John Porter, yeoman-tanner, b. 1596 in Dorset, England. He was living in Hingham, Mass., in 1635, and settled in Salem, Mass., in 1644 where he died in 1676. At his death he was the largest landowner in Salem Village, his lands including parts of modern Salem, Danvers, Wenham, Beverly, Topsfield, and Boxford.

Mary —, probably born in England, d. 1684 or 1685 in Salem, Mass.

Painter of the American Scene

“Landscape Painting on Walls of Rooms”

THERE was no precedent in American mural or easel painting for Rufus Porter's simple frescoed landscapes of rural New England. Except for a group of eighteenth-century wall panels and a few isolated canvases such as Ralph Earl's *Looking East from Denny Hill*, and a handful of anonymous nineteenth-century primitives, early American landscape painting was all — even the work of the Hudson River School — in the academic-romantic style that had its roots in Continental rather than native traditions. This was especially true of mural painting. The history of American frescoes prior to 1850 is — with an occasional minor exception — the history of foreign-style paintings which, like the imported scenic wallpapers, were considered desirable decorations for the homes of the wealthy merchants and landowners. Typical examples are the anonymous Empire-Pompeiiian frescoes in the Alsop house in Middletown, Connecticut, and Corné's romantic foreign landscapes in the Oak Hill Mansion in Peabody, Massachusetts, and in the Sullivan Dorr house in Providence. The group of murals published by E. B. Allen in a chapter of his book on wall paintings entitled “American Landscape” Group are a striking exception to everything we have said. They were simple, native frescoes that beautified the homely dwellings of the ordinary New Englanders. Allen discussed these frescoes as the product of a number of anonymous New England painters. The entire group is the work of Rufus Porter and his school.

These early murals impressed this writer as among the most original and interesting pieces of work in the field of American painting and so began the intriguing jigsaw puzzle which resulted in this publication.

The puzzle began with a homogeneous group of nineteenth-century landscape frescoes which Allen had located in a number of New England houses and which he considered “veritable painted pages of history.” Examples of these frescoes were first published by Allen in *ART IN AMERICA* in 1922. In an article in *House Beautiful* he states that nothing was known about the artists who painted these scenes except a few vague traditions, that one was believed to have been a British spy in the War of 1812, an-

other a wandering sailor, while another was a painter who came from Boston on horseback. In his *Early American Wall Painting* he records the fact that an elderly resident of Westwood, Massachusetts, had heard the artist of the frescoes mentioned in her childhood; according to her he worked free-hand and very rapidly, often finishing a room in two or three days. He is reported to have spent a winter in Westwood and to have decorated houses in nearby towns as well. Other residents of Westwood recalled that the frescoes were said to have been the work of two men. Nancy McClelland in her *Historic Wall Papers* quotes a letter from Mrs. Wiggin's sisters about the frescoes in the Kate Douglas Wiggin house in Hollis, Maine. They were done, according to this letter, by a painter who came from Boston way and who mixed his paints with skim milk. Allen had found the signature "R. Porter — 1838" on a Westwood fresco and concluded that this was the name of one of the itinerant painters. Then in an article on "Old Westwood Murals" Louise Kerr mentions this signature, and above it on the wall the signature of one S. T. Porter. Janet Waring, in her *Early American Stencils*, reproduces landscape paintings in two New Hampshire houses which clearly belong with Allen's series. Waring, and Esther Stevens Brazer in *Early American Decoration*, quote from Rufus Porter's discussion of wall painting but do not connect him with any known frescoes.

It was obvious that the "R. Porter" of the Massachusetts frescoes was no other than Rufus Porter, nineteenth-century inventor, editor, author, and painter. It seemed probable that the *British Spy*, *Wandering Sailor* and *Itinerant on Horseback* were all Rufus Porter too, and S. T. Porter proved to be his son Stephen Twombly. With the murals as a point of departure this writer investigated the details of Rufus Porter's life, and found him not only the author of our most important early American frescoes — among which are those in famous Quillcote, the home of Kate Douglas Wiggin — but one of the most remarkable personalities in the history of nineteenth-century America.

Rufus Porter, self-taught itinerant, lived a life relatively free of the minor conventions and fashions of his time. Independent and progressive, in the mid nineteenth century he approached many twentieth-century concepts. We find him writing an editorial on educational toys, inventing ice-making and washing and sewing machines, planning an automobile and a huge passenger airship. This same modern attitude is inherent in the fresco paintings which occupied a large slice of his time and interest and which reveal him as a pioneer in art as in science.

A number of Rufus Porter's paintings have been well known and well published though not, except in one of the Philpott newspaper articles listed in the Bibliography, under Rufus Porter's name. In an article for July 5, 1936, the *Boston Globe's* art editor definitely ascribes a number of frescoes to Porter, but this newspaper attribution evidently did not take. Though Porter's name is again mentioned in connection with the murals in a couple of Massachusetts newspapers in 1937 and 1938, his frescoes are generally spoken of today by their owners and by art historians as anonymous works; and though Porter painted his way all through eastern New England (see map), only a few Massachusetts murals have ever been credited to him. We have mentioned that E. B. Allen, Louise Carr and Janet Waring reproduced and discussed the frescoes as important early American paintings but did not connect them with Rufus Porter — who had signed a fresco in a Westwood house "R. Porter" and had inscribed his name on two other frescoes. Frances Parkinson Keyes in her novel, *Also the Hills*, reproduces one of Porter's murals for the endpapers and refers to the frescoes as great — but anonymous — art. A W. P. A. publication called *Hands that Built New Hampshire* discusses the Porter frescoes in Lyme and East Jaffrey, but does not name the hands responsible for the art. Kenneth Roberts, in *Rabble in Arms*, describes a frescoed hunting scene in a Maine house (clearly a Porter mural) as done by "a painter from the German settlement at Dresden on the Kennebec."

Numbers of New England newspapers have proudly published the locally famous wall paintings but, undoubtedly associating them with imported scenic wallpapers, have been almost unanimous in ascribing the murals done by Porter and his New England pupils to French or English artists. An Augusta, Maine, newspaper (June 22, 1924) headlines an illustrated account of the Hanson house frescoes in Winthrop, "Marvels of Art on Walls of Old Maine Mansions"; the journalist states that "the general landscape gives the appearance of English design," and speaks of the unknown author as "evidently a man of genius." An item in the *Lewiston Journal* (magazine section, Oct. 31 - Nov. 4, 1908) tells how the frescoes in the old Stanley house in Fairbanks, Maine, were done by "a foreigner who chanced along who professed great skill as a painter of landscapes and waterscapes." The frescoes in the old Cushman Tavern in Webster Corner, Maine, are recorded twenty years later in the *Lewiston Journal* (Jan. 22, 1927) as painted by a stranger from England. The decorations in the Flint Mansion in North Reading, Massachusetts, are described (*Boston Globe*, Sept. 27, 1925) as by one of the "roving English

artists" who, possessing "a good appetite as well as ability to use the brushes . . . became one of America's first interior decorators in exchange for his board and lodging." Marion Nicholl Rawson discusses Porter's New Hampshire frescoes in *Candle Days*, and for their author imagines an "unfortunate Frenchman" who, poor in money ways, used his richness of artistic ability to get a night's or a week's lodging as he traveled. A pictorial calendar, published in 1925 by Sprague Brothers of Boston, reproduces Porter's frescoes in the Coburn Tavern in East Pepperell and states that "the old dance hall at the top of the tavern is well worth a visit for the remarkable fact that crayon sketches on its walls, which are still in a state of perfect preservation, were drawn by French soldiers, who were held in confinement by the English." Museum photographs of Rufus Porter's frescoes are similarly annotated, and most of the owners of the frescoed houses speak glibly of some unknown foreign artist who long ago traveled about New England decorating walls with scenic designs.

Rufus Porter's homely, unpretentious New England scenes are at the opposite pole of Continental style and an account of what they are and what they represent in American painting is long overdue. This account should begin with Porter's own writings. From 1825 to 1846 he published an art instruction serial on "Landscape Painting on Walls of Rooms." The subject is introduced in 1825 in *Curious Arts*, reappears in 1841 in a series of illustrated articles in the pages of the *New York Mechanic* and is presented in final form in 1846 in the *Scientific American*.

The item in *Curious Arts* concisely describes the fundamentals of Porter's fresco technique and reveals his approach to mural painting in 1825. It is here reprinted in full:

Dissolve half a pound of glue in a gallon of water, and with this sizing, mix whatever colours may be required for the work. Strike a line round the room, nearly breast high; this is called the horizon line; paint the walls from the top to within six inches of the horizon line, with sky blue, (composed of refined whiting and indigo, or a slip blue,) and at the same time, paint the space from the horizon line to the blue, with horizon red, (whiting, coloured a little with orange lead and yellow ochre,) and while the two colours are wet, incorporate them partially, with a brush. Rising clouds may be represented by striking the horizon red colour upon the blue, before it is dry, with a large brush. Change some sky about two shades with slip blue and paint your design for rivers, lakes or the ocean. Change some sky blue one shade with forest green, (slip blue and chrome yellow,) and paint the most distant mountains and highlands; shade them while wet, with blue, and heighten them with white; observing always to heighten the side that is towards the principal light of the room. The upper surface of the

ocean must be painted as high as the horizon line, and the distant highlands must rise from ten to twenty inches above it. — Paint the highlands, islands, &c. of the second distance, which should appear from four to six miles distant, with mountain green, (two parts sky blue with one of forest green,) heighten them, while wet, with sulphur yellow (three parts whiting with one of chrome yellow,) and shade with blue-black, (slip blue and lamp black equal.) Paint the lands of the first distance, such as should appear within a mile or two, with forest green; heighten with chrome yellow and shade with black; occasionally incorporating red ochre, french green or whiting. The nearest part, or fore ground, however, should be painted very bold with yellow ochre, stone brown (red and yellow ochre and lamp black equal.) and black. Paint the shores and rocks of the first distance with stone brown; heighten with horizon red, shade with black. For those of the second distance, each colour must be mixed with sky blue. — The wood lands, hedges and trees of the second distance are formed by striking a small flat stiff brush endwise, (which operation is called bushing, and is applied to the heightening and shading all trees and shrubbery of any distance,) with mountain green deepened a little with slip blue; with which also the ground work for trees of the first distance is painted; and with this colour the water may be shaded a little under the capes and islands, thus representing the reflection of the land in the water. Trees of the first distances are heightened with sulphur yellow or french green; and shaded with blue-black. Every object must be painted larger or smaller, according to the distance at which it is represented; thus the proper height of trees in the second distance, is from one to two inches, and other objects in proportion. Those in the first distance from six to ten inches generally; but those in the foreground, which are nearest, are frequently painted as large as the walls will admit. The colours also for distant objects, houses, ships, &c., must be varied, being mixed with more or less sky blue, according to the distance of the object. By these means the view will apparently recede from the eye, and will have a very striking effect.

From the articles in the *New York Mechanic* we realize how the artist has, fifteen years later, formulated his approach to the art of fresco painting.

His attitude remains entirely practical. The articles proceed in logical sequence to give directions for preparing the colors and brushes, planning the design, mixing and applying the paints. The chief plea for wall painting is that painted walls are more practical than wall paper which "is apt to get torn off, and often affords behind it a resting place for various kinds of house insects."

The actual procedure of painting is nothing very complex. Any layman can rapidly acquire the art. By giving "a tremulous motion of the brush" when shading the trunks of trees "a very good representation of bark can be formed." A "bushing" stroke will produce presentable foliage,

the brush being merely held differently for different kinds of foliage. To shade trees or the shores of islands one need only bear down hard on the outside of the brush when drawing the outline.

The method of designing and executing a landscape fresco is exactly described, point for point. Everything is reduced to a logical and exact scheme of design, space and color. First sky and clouds are painted. When that is done the rivers, lakes and mountains should be designed. Each distance must be colored and shaded differently, and paint-mixing directions are given for each part of the composition. Inch by inch specifications are given for objects in the various distances. "The trees on the second distance, should be from eight to twelve inches high; those on the third distance, about three or four, and on the fourth distance, they should not be more than from one, to one and a half inches high." Cities and villages are seen to best advantage in the fourth distance, animals and boats in the second or third.

Color too is arbitrarily simplified. "For the leaves of small shrubs two colors only need be used, one for the light, and one for the dark side." Bushes should be heightened with green, the leaves of ferns with lemon yellow, the stalks drawn with vermilion. Farm fields may be painted in any pleasing variety of greens and yellows, and buildings in any color the artist fancies. Stencils are recommended for the latter.

The landscapes were to be composed by the artist of pleasant rural ingredients — water, houses, animals, villages, trees — selected and combined in a design and colored so as to make up an attractive whole. Porter ends his series of articles by remarking that everything that is pleasing — nature, farm life, hunters, wood cutters at work — can be painted on walls at little expense in colors that will be permanent. The four walls of a parlour can be completely painted in water colors in less than five hours, and at a total cost of ten dollars. The editor hopes that "this kind of work will come into general use."

The *Scientific American* series continues the campaign for landscape painting in place of paper hangings, and attempts to build up "a competent supply of artists who could accommodate the public with this kind of painting." In these 1846 fresco lessons we see most clearly how Porter's admiration for the New England countryside and his feeling for design had crystallized to create a unique style in American landscape painting.

The editor introduces his articles on mural painting with the remark that about twenty different colors, twenty small tin cups and a dozen common paint brushes of different sizes are all the essential materials. He

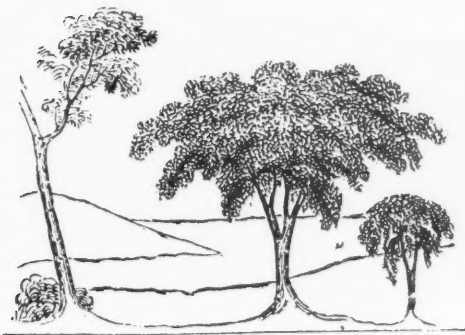
then describes the medium — colors ground and mixed with water (lamp black with rum and water) and tempered with alum and glue. Such opaque water colors will, he says, create an extremely brilliant effect and be most durable. This was no idle boast. Now, after more than a hundred years have passed, many of Porter's frescoes are still crystal clear and amazingly well preserved.

The lessons begin with instructions for mixing and applying the colors and suggestions for laying out the design:*

Make a *sky-blue* by adding celestial blue to whiting . . . also make a *horizon red* by mixing together ten parts in bulk of whiting with two of orange red and one of chrome yellow. Then make a *cloud color* by mixing an indefinite small quantity of horizon red with whiting . . . The sky-blue may be applied by a large common paint brush, either new or worn; but a brush for the application of the cloud color should be large and short . . . As a general rule, a water scene, — a view of the ocean or a lake, — should occupy some part of the walls . . . Other parts, especially over a fireplace, will require more elevated scenes, high swells of land, with villages or prominent and elegant buildings. On the more obscure sections of the walls, especially such as are expected to be obscured by furniture, high

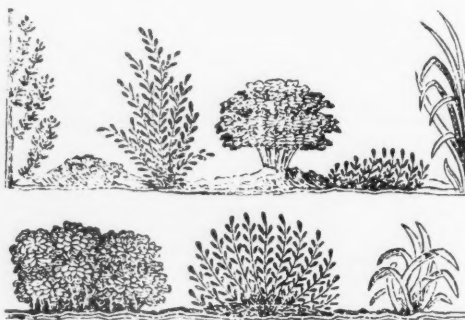


mountains with cascades or farm-hills may be represented. Small spaces between the windows and the corners, may be generally occupied by trees and shrubbery rising from the foreground, and without much regard to the distance.



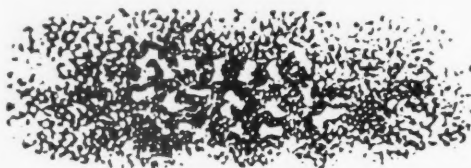
*The quoted excerpts, introductory comments and cuts which follow were printed in much the same form in the author's *American Primitive Painting*.

Porter goes on to tell in detail how the design should be arranged and the colors properly applied. Then follow practical instructions for the use of stencils in landscape paintings:



In painting the pictures of steamboats, ships, and other vessels, it is convenient to have a variety of outline drawings of vessels of various kinds, sizes and positions, on paper: the back sides of these papers are to be brushed over with dry venetian red; then by placing one of the papers against the wall, and tracing the outlines with a pointed piece of iron, bone, or wood, a copy thereof is transferred to the wall ready for coloring . . . the painting of houses, arbors, villages, &c., is greatly facilitated by means of stencils . . . for this purpose several stencils must be made to match each other; for example, one piece may have the form of the front of a dwelling house . . . another the form of the end of the same house . . . a third cut to represent the

roof; and a fourth may be perforated for the windows. Then, by placing these successively on the wall, and painting the ground through the aperture with a large brush . . . the appearance of a house is readily produced, in a nearly finished state . . . Trees and hedge-fences . . . are formed by means of the flat bushing-brush . . . This is dipped in the required color, and struck end-wise upon the wall, in a manner to produce . . . a cluster of small prints or spots thus:

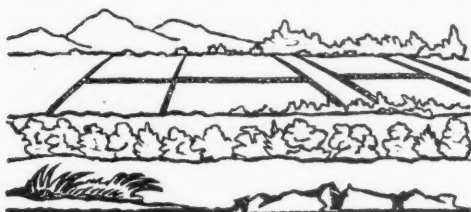


In two other articles the author considered the problem of how to acquire the art of designing landscapes:

This branch of painting admits of such an endless variety of designs, that it would be vain to attempt to give even a tolerable assortment for the use of the practitioner . . . We have presented two or three slight outline sketches, however,

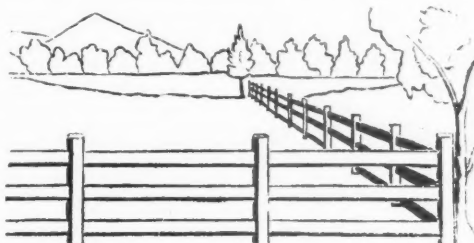
at the head of this article and shall furnish a few more in our next . . . some of the most prominent objects and scenes which may be often repeated, though under different arrangements, are farms, fields, forests, farmhouses, palaces, arbors,

wind-mills, observatories, villages, high rocks, ships, steamboats, sail-boats, islands, hunting scenes, carriages, cattle feeding



or watering, children at play, military parades, water-falls, flower gardens, flocks of birds, balloons, canals, water-mills, rail-roads, bridges, &c. There must be a general consistency observed, and one scene made to connect with another, even although the different scenes should represent different seasons of the year . . . The learner, for the purpose of acquiring the art of designing, should habituate himself to making close observations of objects,

and scenery, and to imagine various scenes in his mind, diverse from anything he has seen, and practice sketching such designs when his mind is most free from other cares.



The design, Porter says, must be carefully planned in the artist's mind, but in executing it "if there appears any break, or imperfect match between the sections, he has only to build a tree or bush over it." The teacher suggests that a consistent season of the year should be maintained within one painting, but various seasons may be represented in different parts of the room. Shrubbery, tall ferns and flags, he advises, may be placed near doors and windows as a sort of border for other scenes, and rough ledges of rock are often placed in the immediate foreground to give variety to the first distance. All this indicates a purposely abstract approach to the art of painting which is as radical for that time as is Porter's choice of the American farm as the finest subject matter for American landscape painting. We have already quoted Porter's modern-sounding advice to finish landscape painting with original designs which "richly embellish the work

though not in perfect imitation of anything." "This remark," he states, "is particularly applicable to various wild shrubbery suitable for filling up the foreground, and usually based on the bottom of the first distance. Of this variety we have presented a few samples at the head of this article."

It seems extraordinary to find that a provincial nineteenth-century painter thought it neither necessary nor expedient to imitate nature when more attractive designs might be conceived by the artist. Rufus Porter's desire to "excel nature itself" in the interest, clarity and brilliance of design largely accounts for the modern character of his deliberately stylized landscapes. His non-illusionistic approach should be stressed in considering the style of Porter's painting, for it is this which most fundamentally determines its character. Rufus Porter painted the New England scenery he knew, but he did not copy it. He recorded it from a clarified, composite picture in his mind's eye, using personal formulas for the perspective and the design. The content of the painting, the drawing and coloring, are reduced to the simplest terms. The artist speaks in his articles of "cloud color," "stone-brown," "mountain green"; and we find in his frescoes that his fences are generally black and white, his boats red and yellow — which he may have decided on as "fence color" and "boat color." Elements of one scene, and whole scenes, are repeated in the various frescoes; and many of the details, radically simplified, are executed with stencils. A number of the frescoes are painted in monochrome, which technique Porter discusses in an article on "Light and Shade painting on walls." These murals, done in neutral tones of slate, umber, gray green, or plum color, accented with white, are the simplest and most perfectly architectonic of the murals, and the most beautiful. Porter always thought of his mural landscapes as simple wall decorations, architecturally related to the space they were to ornament. His early training as an artisan had left its impress on his work as an artist. His art had sprung from craft rather than academic painters' traditions, and so was not related to any established schools of painting, was entirely non-derivative, original, unpretentious; and aimed at good solid design and execution rather than at academic realism or a fashionable sophisticated style.

Rufus Porter's portraits, engravings and murals are in the category of the art recently termed "primitive," "provincial" or "pioneer." All these terms as applied to early American painting point to the simple and independent approach of the native American artist and to the abstract, design-like quality of his art. These primitive painters came out of the American craft tradition. They were uniformly ignorant of the fashionable academic

training which aimed at subtly reproducing in paint the visible appearance of things. They had, in other words, no training for illusionistic painting. The significant outcome of this was that their technical liabilities made way for a compensating emphasis on pure design, which resulted in an essentially abstract style. These painters were quite ignorant too of the great schools of European painting which the academies recommended as models; and so their approach to painting was personal and independent. Theirs was a pioneer product, a simple, sturdy, homespun art. The folk painters relied on their everyday provincial lives for their subject matter, and on their early craft training, supplemented by elementary art instruction books, for their techniques. Rufus Porter's art is a striking example of this approach, and the relationship between his early paintings and the craft painting which he practiced in Maine is quite apparent. Certainly the delicate, decorative drawing of his portraits is related to the ornamental painting of the time, while the stencil motifs which Porter introduced into his landscapes reflect his early interest in decorative painting. In comparing Rufus Porter's highly stylized frescoes with Corné's illusionistic murals on one hand and with the typical scenes stenciled on contemporary furniture and accessories on the other, we again see how Porter's art developed from native American craft painting rather than from academic and Continental traditions.

The New England Frescoes

IN comparing the reproductions of the early with the late frescoes it will be interesting to trace in detail the evolution of Porter's style. In the early paintings the drawing is tighter and the shading sharper and more arbitrary. The corkwork technique for the foliage, the limited color range and the naiveté of many of the details is unconsciously primitive. The later paintings show a looser and larger handling and a greater variety of designs with more genre incidents animating the scene. The perspective is knowing. The color is bold and varied, and in the monochrome frescoes the tonal range is rich and full. The stylized foreground plants are a late invention, and add greatly to the now deliberate formalizing of the design. In contrasting the early with the late paintings we realize, as we do if we compare Porter's early with his late writing on wall painting, that his murals evolved in two decades from a spontaneous and naive kind of primitive decoration to a highly styled formal art.

Internal stylistic evidence and corroborating factual data make it possible to divide Porter's frescoes into three major chronological groups. The frescoes in East Pepperell, Massachusetts, Portland, Maine, and all those in New Hampshire seem to belong to the first period. The 1884 *Scientific American* article states that Porter started mural painting in 1824. In 1825 he published *Curious Arts* in Concord and evidently painted in New Hampshire about that time. The bulk of his earliest frescoes should probably be dated around 1825. He seems to have worked a bit later, roughly about 1830-35, in Maine and Massachusetts. Then about 1838-40 he apparently decorated a large number of houses in eastern Massachusetts towns. By 1840 Porter's interest had shifted from mural painting to journalism, and the 1845 frescoes in East Weymouth, Massachusetts, probably represent one of a few isolated mural commissions which he executed during his years of active editorship.

The old Coburn Tavern in East Pepperell, Massachusetts, on the road from Groton to Townsend was probably one of the very first places that Rufus Porter decorated with his painted landscapes. On a stylistic basis it seems reasonable to date these murals c. 1824, the year Porter started wall painting. The fine, three-story brick tavern was a landmark in the Massachusetts countryside. The gambrel-roofed ballroom occupying the entire third story is large enough to accommodate a hundred dancing couples, and the decoration of such a vast area of wall space was surely a courageous

undertaking for an inexperienced, young landscape painter. The present owner of the tavern, Mr. Thomas Hayes, said that the nameless artist's daily schedule was reported to have been painting in the daytime, visiting the taproom in the evening, and fiddling for dances in the ballroom all night. Perhaps Porter, discouraged by his unsuccessful attempt to sell small landscape paintings in 1824, had gone back to his old profession of fiddling for dances, and had then thought of decorating the dance halls with large mural landscapes. Here in the Coburn Tavern he painted all the walls of the huge ballroom, even decorating the fiddler's stand with a landscape, and he also painted the entire second story hall and the stairway walls leading up to the ballroom. These frescoes are rather haphazardly planned and crudely colored, mostly in greens and yellows. The trees are painted with half of the foliage yellow ochre, half black, in a childlike, stylized interpretation of the lighted and shaded sides of a tree.

We see this same formula for trees in the Prescott Tavern frescoes, which are probably the earliest of the New Hampshire series. The Prescott Tavern, recently torn down, was located in East Jaffrey, on the third New Hampshire turnpike between Boston and northern Vermont. Here, after passing the toll gate in East Jaffrey village, Porter arrived one day about the year 1824, the year he is supposed to have started wall painting. He stayed to paint on the walls of the tavern in payment for his board — it is said — a most remarkable variety of landscape scenes. We notice that Porter's tavern murals are characteristically more animated and more varied in subject matter than those which adorn the private dwellings. In the Prescott Tavern the parlor contained a harbor scene supposed to be Boston Harbor, an overmantel of Dartmouth College, a woodland hunting scene including a large man and a horse-sized dog, and a section of farm countryside backed by a Vesuvius-like mountain. The latter may have been suggested by the view of Mount Monadnock which can be seen from the tavern on a clear day, with the erupting smoke a Hawaiian recollection of a volcanic mountain. Porter's early combination of naive theme and crisp, primitive design is strikingly illustrated in the stream of smoke coming from this mountain, with two isolated puffs which drift beyond a doorway but are moored to the main stream by a bold stroke of rust-colored paint. All this scenery is topped with a stenciled black, orange and yellow frieze. The overmantel is framed with woodwork marbled in gray, rust and black, and the baseboards are similarly painted. The chief colors of the frescoes are yellow, rust, black, and white, with the bright yellow ochre dominating. The parlor faces south and east, and seeing these bril-

liant decorations as the midday sun reached the notched noon-mark on the floor of the front hall was a breathtaking experience.

Porter was frankly experimental in coloring and designing these early tavern frescoes. In one scene there are three houses in a row, each one treated slightly differently. Five different varieties of trees are painted, and the foliage seems to have been done with sponges, corks and brushes. Porter was experimenting with stencils too, and in one tree we find half a dozen squirrels, three black and three brown, all done with one stencil but each one drawn in a different position. A balanced group of huge stenciled stars and a rising sun with a very human face in the overmantel with a waning moon smiling from the opposite wall, and elongated trees whose branches grow into a strawberry vine frieze over the windows — these are details which make these early paintings seem closer to pure decoration than to ordinary landscape painting.

In the Joshua Eaton house frescoes in Bradford the relationship between Porter's ornamental and landscape painting is again apparent. Here the frieze design and the leafing of the trees are done in identical technique. These New Hampshire frescoes represent some of the earliest of Porter's murals, and in them we see in embryo the elements of his later paintings. The large trees, the foreground plants, the house with steps, sailboat, clouds, islands, even the reflections in the water, are typical of his work; but their execution and the manner in which they are combined is clearly immature as compared with the frescoes in the Massachusetts towns; and Porter's interest in perspective, almost as a theme within a painting, has not yet appeared.

In the Bidwell Tavern frescoes in Langdon we see, as in the Prescott Tavern, how the top branches of the trees are turned into a sort of border vine motif which is as frankly ornamental as the all-over spongework design which covers the ceiling. This room, said to have been decorated as a bridal chamber for the tavern keeper's young wife, is described by Marion Rawson in *Candle Days*. She calls attention to an interesting detail, the pink painted sunset glow in the western corner of the room where the actual sunlight occurred, which is frequently found in Porter's New Hampshire frescoes. Mrs. Rawson exactly senses the primitive naiveté of these paintings, and comments on the anonymous frescoes as "so full of the grotesque yet so overflowing with desire to express the beauty that appealed to the artist." Here is her description of one of the frescoes: "The eye is led past an island or two; and there, as large as a nearby house, graze black cows, with great white African horns and white tails;

compact groups of trees are constrained from going to sea, by snugly-fitting split-rail fences; a row-boat is tethered by a rope, a good quarter of a mile long; and a slender light-house waves three flags, thus guiding to land some distant caravels, whose keels ride gaily the tips of the waves."

In Frances Parkinson Keyes' *Also the Hills* the frescoes in the Carr house in North Haverhill are woven into the story. The following excerpts from the novel are interesting bits of analytical comment on these early New Hampshire frescoes:

He saw, for instance, that in the fresco on the nearest wall, the flags on the sailboats were blowing in one direction and the smoke from steamboats in another, that the island lay on top of the water like a platter, and that the crude execution of the grass and houses was completely at variance with the graceful design of the great central tree.

"Well now, I don't know," Daniel said doubtfully. "You mustn't get your hopes up about those frescoes. They're sort of crude, when you come right down to it. I don't suppose they were made by a professional. I suppose they were done by some fellow living around here, who'd never had any lessons. Or maybe by one of those itinerant artists who went from place to place on horseback and painted to pay for their board and lodging, the same as the itinerant cobblers made shoes and the itinerant tailors made coats."

"But, Father Farnam, Tante Odilisse always says that rugmaking is in some ways the most remarkable of all the arts, because rugs are made by uneducated persons and yet these people have such a great feeling for symbolism and beauty that they reveal it. I think the man who painted the frescoes may have had the same kind of a feeling. If he did, and could show it, then wasn't he a great artist whether he'd ever had any lessons or not?"

The qualities of Porter's earliest frescoes should certainly be viewed in a positive manner. The early murals were painted with a simplicity and a sharp, vivid style that was necessarily lost in the ampler rhythms of the mature designs. The incisive drawing of the early New Hampshire frescoes such as those in the Tracy house in Greenfield is unique in Porter's work. In the early frescoes too, well exemplified by those in the Holsaert house in Hancock, the limited range of color and the serene, open design is especially effective for mural painting. The color scheme of the Holsaert house paintings is an almost neutral background of light gray for sky and water, pale yellow ochre for foreground and light green for the middle distance, with small accenting bits of vivid color and black shading. None of the later frescoes, except those done in monochrome, quite equal the perfect appropriateness of these early paintings as wall decorations for the spare New England houses they adorn.

The Maine and Massachusetts frescoes which Porter painted around 1830, when tradition records the execution of the Fryeburg frescoes, show more robust handling with fuller designs and richer color. In this period the trees are the all-important feature and they occupy most of the landscape space. It was interesting to find owners of frescoed houses in three different Maine towns referring to their "tree room."

About this time Porter seems to have decorated a number of houses in Georgetown, Groveland, Rocks Village, Amesbury, and Harvard, Massachusetts. It is remembered that the Georgetown murals were done in 1832 by a "tramp painter" who went about like a modern hitch hiker, getting his board for work along the way. So we can establish an approximate date for this stylistically homogeneous group. The gray-green monochrome frescoes in the old Pingree house in Georgetown are representative and especially attractive. The mossy color somehow suggests at the same time a neutral gray wall and the green tones of landscape scenery. Mr. Carlton Moore, the owner of the Pingree house, writes that he was told the painter got his green coloring matter from the mud banks of Georgetown. Pigment was often derived from natural clays and the rosy "plum" monochrome frescoes in the Hickox house in Groveland look too as if such clay pigment might well have been used. The perfectly preserved frescoes in the Stacy house in Groveland are among the finest examples of Porter's full-color murals, and here a unique item is the quarter-inch strip of gilt paint separating a simulated baseboard from the landscape scene.

In these Massachusetts frescoes we begin to be aware of greater interest in perspective, larger handling and a more conscious awareness of the possibilities of formal design. The stylized foreground shrubs become prominent at this time and from now on become a trademark of Porter's frescoes, like the large foreground elms. We might note here that the motif of a stenciled sail boat with a man at the tiller is another Porter signature, which he used in his murals during two decades.

In the late Massachusetts frescoes, dating from the general period of the 1838 Westwood murals, we see Rufus Porter's mature landscape art. The first sight of these frescoes is a noteworthy occurrence. In the West or Colburn houses in Westwood, for example, one is first struck by the ample and yet compact design of a whole wall painting, and then by such details as fields checkered in emerald, yellow ochre and brown, with pink and lemon yellow houses set against a clear blue sky; the strong, free outline of a lake; the staccato rhythm of receding fence-rails; the sweep of sails; the fine design of stylized plants and shrubbery. One is impressed with

the fact that, despite their primarily decorative nature, nothing is haphazard or flimsy in these frescoes. The designs are as structurally conceived as an architect's blueprint. A shore-line is a half inch border of solid brown, the houses are sturdy four-square structures, and all the colors are full-bodied and clear.

Rufus Porter's late frescoes are brimming with gay, lively action; and through the genre elements especially we feel ourselves acquainted with our itinerant painter, and sense the quality of the vigorous, free life he led and the cheerful person he was. In the best of the Colburn house scenes a steamboat painted in brilliant, flat red, yellow, turquoise, black, and white, churns its brisk way across a bright blue bay. In this same house there is a mountain-climbing scene — the one signed by R. Porter and S. T. Porter in 1838 — which most appropriately runs up the stair well. Here we follow some frisky mountain goats and at the head of the stairs meet a man who looks over the precipice while a timid lad draws back from the dizzy height. In the sunny upstairs hall a peaceful farm scene with a herd of cows strikes a relaxing note after the energetic stairway scene. The old Guild house in this same town contains a similar craggy stairway landscape, with hunters chasing a deer which, as stair-top climax, leaps off the edge of the cliff. At the foot of the stairs there are a pair of cats hissing at each other from two trees, and at the top a quiet village scene complete with neat houses, well sweep, and a couple holding hands in a hammock. A unique signature for Porter, musician-painter, is the fiddle crossed by a bow found at the foot of a row of elms in one of these murals. In the Sumner house, also in Westwood, the downstairs hall is decorated with an attractive panorama of houses, fences and trees, cows, and a lake with a sailboat; while up the stairway we find accelerated action in another animated mountain climbing scene. In the Andrew house in West Boxford the stairway hunt ends at the bottom with a waterfall, decoratively carrying out the downward movement of the stairs.

As we travel from house to house we are especially impressed with Porter's method of coordinating the design and tempo of his frescoes with the shape and function of the walls on which they are painted. The reproductions of the smoke-gray monochrome decoration in the Winn house in Wakefield give a good idea of the architectonic plan for the frescoes in a whole room. Especially worth noting is the vertical emphasis of the paintings on the side walls and the horizontal sweep of the roadside overmantel scene, with the two stenciled horsemen scooting along over the exact

center of the mantel. These frescoes are not just pictures on plaster; they are murals in the true sense of the word.

Rufus Porter's late overmantels are quite naturally among his most important wall paintings, and in these the deliberately balanced rhythmic design is most apparent. The umber monochrome overmantel in the old Colonial Inn in North Reading is a typical example. In the von Klock house in Wakefield the overmantel is unusually formalized in design, with a large tree at each end flanking a smooth hilltop along whose ridge is placed an exactly balanced line of trees and stenciled buildings.

The Biblical scenes in the Senigo house in East Weymouth — unique in theme and Porter's latest datable frescoes* — are most highly stylized. The decorative tropical landscape, we have noted, reflects Porter's youthful expedition to the Hawaiian Islands. The subject matter of these frescoes, however, is specifically connected with his mature interest in religion. His concern with the Millerites, the religious column in the *Scientific American* and his religious pamphlet, *Essential Truth*, all date from the same general period as these late Biblical paintings. In the Sacrifice of Isaac the compact honeycomb of spectators in the right foreground is an interesting detail, as are the mottled columns of billowing smoke which are strongly reminiscent of marbled woodwork. In another scene jagged rocks and a waterfall form a stagelike setting for the rhythmical action which builds up to a crescendo in the figures of Elijah and the King who stand, like twin figureheads, on a ledge of rock. We feel in these richly designed Biblical scenes, and in the knowing simplicity of the late monochrome landscapes, that Porter's wall painting had indeed undergone an amazing evolution since the days of the primitive Coburn Tavern decorations.

A good many of Porter's frescoes, from the earliest to the latest ones, seem to have been executed with the help of assistants. The early decorations of the Joshua Eaton house are recorded in Waring's book as the work of "two young men," and a late mural in the Colburn house in Westwood was signed by Rufus Porter and his son Stephen. There is verbal information about another painter named Swift who also worked on some of the Westwood murals and of a Paine who painted around Parsonfield, Maine. Tradition records that one Orison Wood executed the Porter-like murals in and about Lewiston, Maine. There are signatures of "A. N. Gilbert" and "E. V. Bennett" on Porter-style frescoes in two houses in Winthrop, Maine, and of a "J. D. Poor" in the Priest house in Groton, Massachusetts.

*Dated 1845 according to information given by E. B. Allen to the Metropolitan Museum for their reference collection of photographs.

Poor was also remembered in a number of towns in the vicinity of Vienna, Maine; and on investigation he turned out to be Rufus' nephew, Jonathan D. Poor. All this points to the probability of numerous assistants or pupils, especially during the Maine period.

Rufus Porter had from his early twenties been actively interested in teaching. By 1815 he had been a teacher of drumming and drum painting and master of two district schools and a dancing school; in 1825 he had published detailed instructions for mural landscape painting, and in 1841 and 1846 these lessons were printed in revised form. It seems reasonable to suppose that from about 1824 to 1846 he was both practicing and teaching the art of wall painting and that his son Stephen, Messrs. Gilbert and Bennett, Swift, Paine, Poor, and Orison Wood were among his satellites. Rufus Porter, a modest itinerant painter, evidently had a sizable following in his day. He was quite literally a "master" of mural painting with a "school" of pupils — which is unique in the annals of American provincial painting.

Orison Wood (1811-42) of Auburn, Maine, was Porter's outstanding follower. He is listed in the Wood genealogy as "a painter by trade" who was also a school teacher. His father, Solomon, had gone to Boston as a young man to seek his fortune, and had found employment with an Italian who made and painted and peddled decorative plaster ornaments. Orison evidently learned the plaster painting technique from his father, using it to decorate plaster walls instead of figurines. About 1830 he frescoed at least four houses in West Auburn, Lewiston and Webster Corner, Maine, with landscapes clearly planned after Porter designs. These were executed in Porter's recommended technique, perhaps actually under his supervision. Wood was however no mere assistant and his animated murals have, within the Porter formula, a distinctive gracile style of their own. We get a first-hand glimpse of the painter's sales technique from a 1927 issue of the *Lewiston Journal* where we read the story — recorded by Captain Cushman's daughter — of how a stranger came to the door of the Cushman Tavern in Webster Corner soon after it was built in 1826, said he was an artist, and could paint the walls with marvelous decorations which would help to advertise the Cushman House far and wide and make its name notable on the lips of the traveling public. Wood's frescoes should have brought travelers to the Cushman Tavern in his day, and perhaps after having been ignored for over a century visitors will again come to the former tavern on the old stage road from Portland to Bangor just to see the frescoes. Certainly these landscape designs in which willowy trees

fill the space in a fine, lacy pattern are outstanding examples of an early American art. Wood's interpretation of Rufus Porter's murals carry the master's feeling for abstract design and decorative color to a dramatic culmination. Orison Wood's highly stylized versions of Porter's murals are actually more interesting, as pure design, than the original models, but as wall decorations they fail to achieve the fine functional relationship to the wall itself which characterizes Porter's frescoes. Rufus Porter's landscapes seem to open out the space on all sides, to make of the wall a sort of transition between outdoors and in. The painted perspective amplifies the room and the color lightens it, and still the decoration emphasizes the structural lines of the walls. Wood's strong colors and vivid designs, quite differently, project themselves into the room and seem to crowd the space with their bold, staccato rhythms.

Jonathan D. Poor, who lettered "J. D. Poor" on a paddle-wheel steamboat in a fresco in Groton, Massachusetts and signed or initialed several frescoes in the vicinity of Vienna, Maine, was the son of Rufus' sister Ruth Porter Poor. She had married Jonathan Poor of Baldwin (later Sebago), Maine, shortly after the Porter family moved from Boxford to Baldwin in 1801. This was soon after Poor's first wife, Caroline Porter, Ruth's cousin, had died. Their son Jonathan D., presumably the lad "Joe" who traveled with Rufus in 1823 as a portrait painting assistant, evidently spent ten years — from about 1830 to 1840 — as an active member of the Porter landscape school. In 1831 he signed and dated a landscaped fireboard, painted on wood, now owned by the Downtown Gallery in New York. Twenty-four of the houses that he frescoed in a dozen Maine towns are recorded in the appended check list and it is remembered that there were many more long since burned or destroyed. He was the most prolific of Porter's wall painting pupils.

Poor stuck very exactly to Porter's designs and coloring, so that the difference from the master's work is difficult to describe. It is solely a difference of artistic personality and artistic power. Poor's painting is a bit more haphazard, a bit thinner — and that is all.

Jonathan Poor was living in Vienna about 1833, according to family records, and at that time decorated at least two houses. Vienna was the home of his first wife, Caroline Porter, the daughter of Tyler's brother Benjamin Porter, who had moved there from Winthrop in 1788. In 1834 Poor signed and dated a fresco in the old Benjamin Bachellor house in South Chesterville. This date may be considered approximate for his work in Chesterville, Farmington and the neighboring Maine towns in which

he worked. The only Massachusetts murals by Poor are those before mentioned in the Priest house in Groton. Porter may have had more commissions in Massachusetts towns than he could execute, and perhaps asked Poor to come down and work on the Groton frescoes in his place. These frescoes were probably painted at about the same time as those around Farmington, and may be dated, very approximately, c. 1835. In 1840 Poor, back in Maine, signed a fresco in the Norton house in East Baldwin. He died in 1845, and the 1840 frescoes done near his birthplace are the last evidence of his work as a mural painter.

An account in the *Franklin Journal* (Sept. 15, 1914) describes the frescoes in the old Russ house in Farmington Falls, Maine, built in 1795, which was first a store, then a tavern and then a dwelling house. The newspaper reports that the colors were very distinct, the landscapes being painted in brilliant pigments that remained remarkably well preserved after almost a hundred years, even after the roof came off and they were exposed to the elements with no protection whatsoever. Porter's claim that his paints were durable was a modest understatement. "The man who did the painting in this house," continues the account, "was named Poor and he did many other houses in the vicinity . . . one . . . is the Stanley house in Fairbanks. This house has two remarkably fine rooms on the second floor and these are well preserved. Mr. Poor went about the country painting rooms and he lived with the family whose house he was decorating and received about \$10.00 for each room." Porter, in one of the *New York Mechanic* articles, mentions ten dollars as the estimated price for painting a room with landscape frescoes. It seems likely that this was the standard fee for Porter and his group of wall painters — just as it was their custom to live with their clients while at work.

In the vicinity of Parsonfield, Maine, a number of houses were decorated by a painter who worked either with Porter or under his tutelage. Tradition records the name "Paine" which, perhaps only coincidentally, is the name of one of the early Boxford families. The frescoes attributed to Paine have the same content, designs and technique as Porter's, but a less meticulous brushwork and looser composition is immediately apparent. There are also trunks of trees scarcely related to the superimposed foliage, enormous, clumsy elm-sized cedars, and details executed in a careless way Porter never painted. Paine's signature seems to have been an uprooted dead tree which falls between the branches of another. This trade-mark tree is to be found in all of his frescoes, which he probably executed alone after Porter's designs and instructions.

Examination of some of the murals near Farmington, traditionally ascribed to Poor, reveal this Paine tree as part of the composition, pointing to the conclusion that Paine and Poor collaborated on some of the wall paintings. This was the case in the old Russ house frescoes and those in the Milton Gay house in Fairbanks. East Baldwin, where Poor signed a fresco in 1840, was very near Parsonfield and Limerick where Paine had worked. It looks as if Poor worked a bit in the vicinity of Parsonfield with Paine, and Paine collaborated with Poor in and around Farmington; while Porter was possibly designing and directing the work in both areas.

A. N. Gilbert and E. V. Bennett who signed frescoes in Winthrop were two more pupils who worked — with Porter or under his direction — in Maine. The frescoes Bennett signed are not very different from Porter's. In these and the unsigned murals in the old Benjamin house, probably by Porter and a helper, the coloring is slightly muddy and parts of the drawing seem a bit heavy-handed, indicating the work of an assistant who did not have Porter's sure touch. The Knowlton house frescoes containing two stenciled signatures of "E. J. Gilbert" are stylistically quite different from Porter's though the designs are essentially similar. These frescoes also show definite connections with certain details of the Paine, Poor and Wood murals, which strengthens the supposition that Porter's pupils did collaborate and work as a "school." The chevron-striped cedars and birds perched on the trees are found identically in the Farmington-group frescoes, and in Orison Wood's. Like Wood, too, Gilbert colored the ground in oddly mingled stripes of ochre, rust and green. Both pupils misunderstood Porter's use of yellow ochre for the foreground, green for the middle ground and "horizon red" in the far distance. It was typical of copyist work to combine the colors in an arbitrary arrangement as Wood and Gilbert did. In the foliage of the trees in the Paine frescoes yellow and green are casually mingled, while Porter always painted the foliage yellow on one side and green on the other to indicate the lighted and shaded sides of the tree. Porter had a painting shorthand vocabulary which his pupils generally misread; and this makes it easy to identify Porter's original frescoes from even the closest copies.

"Swift" of Westwood was another Porter assistant, and his son Stephen Twombly who signed one of the Westwood murals was undoubtedly a partner in the wall painting business as he was in the publication of the *American Mechanic*.

There are landscape frescoes in the old Captain Dan Mather house in Marlboro, Vermont, and some executed by a John Avery in half a dozen

houses in Wolfeboro and Middleton, New Hampshire, which look as if two inexperienced painters had been inspired by Porter's murals to try some of their own. These crude frescoes, however, can scarcely be listed with those of Porter's immediate school.

It is worth noticing that in a large proportion of the frescoed houses in which Porter assistants or pupils worked marbled or grained woodwork and stenciled wall decorations are also found. There is decorative painting, however, in only three houses apparently frescoed by Porter alone. We know that Porter had done house painting in Portland. He had discussed in *Curious Arts* and the painting articles the techniques of marbling and graining for woodwork, painting in figures for carpets and borders and painting walls "plain or figured." There is little question that Rufus Porter had done some woodwork painting and possibly also wall stenciling before starting on his fresco painting career, and it seems probable that he did a bit of this decorating at the same time that he painted the landscape frescoes, in which indeed he made liberal use of stencils. It seems likely, however, that he delegated most of this routine decoration to assistants, a number of whom may have been itinerant house decorators who were learning from him the art of mural landscape painting.

In the Bidwell and Prescott Taverns and in Quillcote there is no evidence of any assistant, and the stenciled designs and decorated woodwork may be assumed to be Porter's. In the Joshua Eaton house both the landscape paintings and the stenciled walls are definitely recorded as the work of the two young men who also marbled the woodwork and ornamented the parlor mantel. In the Knowlton house E. J. Gilbert painted a stencil border, and he did some woodwork graining similar to that executed by Orison Wood in the Cushman Tavern. In the Parsonfield houses frescoed by Paine there is this identical type of grained woodwork, and in the McDonald Inn in Limerick which he frescoed there is a room with a frieze of ropes and tassels stenciled in rust and yellow. In the Priest house J. D. Poor stenciled in an upstairs room a frieze of brown and black and blue on a light rose ground; and in the old Russ house in Farmington Falls he (or Paine) decorated the large ground floor room and stairway with stenciled designs in yellow, pink, red, and black. On the basis of the stenciling in these houses it may be conclusively stated that Rufus Porter and his school were responsible for a number of the early stenciled wall decorations which have recently been so much admired.

An interesting possibility is that Rufus Porter about 1825 learned the latest methods of wall stenciling from the two Moses Eatons, father and

son. The Eatons were the best known stencil artists of the time, and they were living and working in the tiny village of Hancock, New Hampshire, while Porter was there painting mural landscapes. In the Holsaert house in Hancock which Porter frescoed there was a stenciled room, now replastered, which is said to have been done by Moses Eaton, Jr. Perhaps he and Rufus Porter, who were almost exactly the same age, collaborated for a while, Porter doing the landscapes and Eaton the stenciling. It is even entirely possible that Moses Eaton, Jr. was the other of the "two young men" who decorated the Joshua Eaton house in Bradford; and Joshua Eaton was probably related to Moses. The stencil decoration in this house is certainly much like Eaton's known work and some of the patterns are identical with the Eaton stencils found in an old kit. It is worth remarking that the stencil decorations found with Porter frescoes are limited to the period of c. 1825-35, when Rufus Porter may well have worked with or been inspired by Eaton. No stencil decorations are found with the later Massachusetts frescoes.

The Porter or Porter-school wall stencils, unlike the frescoes, would be impossible to attribute without external evidence. It is only safe to assume that the stencil decorations found in houses which Porter alone frescoed are probably his; and perhaps at some later date more examples of his work as a stencil decorator and facts about when and where he worked will come to light.

Attributing the frescoes, fortunately, presents few difficulties. The Porter and Porter-school murals are distinguished by a typical style and content which makes them easy for anyone to identify. Their most obvious characteristics are their large scale, clear, bright colors, and bold design and execution. The three most frequently recurring scenes are harbor views much like Portland harbor as seen from Munjoy Hill with houses, ships and islands, mountains in the distance, and large "feather-duster" elm trees and small shrubs in the immediate foreground; mountain-climbing or hunting scenes used for stairway decorations; and farm-village scenes, most often used for the overmantel fresco, with buildings, fields, fences, roads, and again the large elms and small stylized shrubs in the foreground. The large trees invariably occupy almost the entire height of the painted wall and establish the first plane of the picture in a manner which was Porter's special invention and which he consistently used. Other earmarks of his murals include the use of stencils for many details such as houses and boats, the billowing round clouds, the clear reflections of objects in water, and the sharp shading of the darkened sides of houses and trees.

Occasional exotic details such as tropical trees and vines, based on recollections of Hawaiian scenery, are also characteristic of the frescoes.

In the check list which follows close to a hundred early New England houses are listed as decorated by Rufus Porter and his pupils or assistants. Many more must have been redecorated, rebuilt or destroyed since Porter's time, and some have undoubtedly escaped the attention of this author. In 1841 Porter stated in the *New York Mechanic* that "hundreds of rooms and entries have been painted in New England scenery." It seems probable that he decorated many hundreds of rooms during his twenty years of fresco painting.

These paintings do not strike one as dull antiquities today but seem fresh and vital and modern. Although the Porter frescoes are still generally considered the efforts of isolated anonymous painters, they have in the last few years been individually appreciated. Several present owners of the frescoed houses bought them for homes primarily because of the frescoes. Mrs. Hickox of Groveland has cuts of three of her frescoes on her personal stationery. The old Jefferds' Tavern in York Village, Maine, has just been decorated with landscapes painted in close reproduction of some of Porter's Maine frescoes. Frances Parkinson Keyes reproduced one of the New Hampshire frescoes as endpapers for *Also the Hills*, and the painted rooms are the most prominent piece of stage setting for this best-selling novel of New England life today. In the Colburn house in Westwood the tenant brought one fresco up to date during the last war by chalking on the wall next to the steamship "Victory" a large V with three dots and a dash!

The other side of the picture is that dozens of fine Porter frescoes have been badly neglected, papered over, repainted, or destroyed. One owner said frankly that he couldn't bear to live with the paintings and so had them wall-papered, the fate of one out of every four of the recorded Porter murals. Even the famous "painted room" of Quillcote, at one time open to the public and reproduced on picture post cards, is today covered with wall paper. In concluding the discussion of Rufus Porter's frescoes this writer wishes to make a strenuous plea for their preservation. The highest hope for this publication is that it may result in sufficient interest in the frescoes for some museums to take the best of them into safekeeping, so that at least typical samples of Porter's art may be saved for posterity. When one considers all the elegant nineteenth-century interiors that have been set up in our great museums it seems reasonable to hope that some of

them might wish to have examples of these wonderfully fresh and vital painted rooms which Rufus Porter created in the simple New England homes and inns of his day.*

It seems amazing that any of these frescoes have escaped such pernicious enemies as leaks, cracks, mildew, dirt, and repaint, to survive in excellent condition for over a century. A few of them have led a charmed life and appear today almost as bright and perfect as they did when they were painted, but more have suffered the expected fates.

On one field trip this author visited the four Massachusetts towns of Westwood, Wakefield, West Boxford, and North Reading to investigate a dozen houses believed to have Porter's landscape frescoes on their walls. Of these, one house had burned to the ground. In one the frescoes were, according to the owner "so far gone that we did away with them and replastered." Who can tell now what competent restoration might have achieved? In one house the frescoes had been so repainted as to be a caricature of the originals. In another they were thickly varnished over. One of the frescoed rooms in this house had been papered a generation ago and the paper has not yet been removed. In another house most of the frescoes which were "faded" had been wall-papered. In one a door had been cut through the hallway fresco leaving only three grazing cows to represent the former farm scene. In one house the painted walls were scrubbed with soap powder on cleaning day. In another the rust-red base-board strip — part of the mural design — had been enameled dark green. Of all these painted rooms only two had escaped real injury. One had been well restored in 1910 and was lovingly cared for at this time by the owner; another had, in an unkempt house teeming with children, miraculously escaped with only a few scratches and scribbles on the painted walls. Here however the tenants were definitely uncomfortable about living in so strangely decorated a house, and were asking the owner for permission to paper over the murals.

Rufus Porter's mural paintings, like his inventions and his scientific journals, were pioneer products, far ahead of their time. They represent our first native landscape school, and are among the most original and important artistic achievements of nineteenth-century America. Surely it

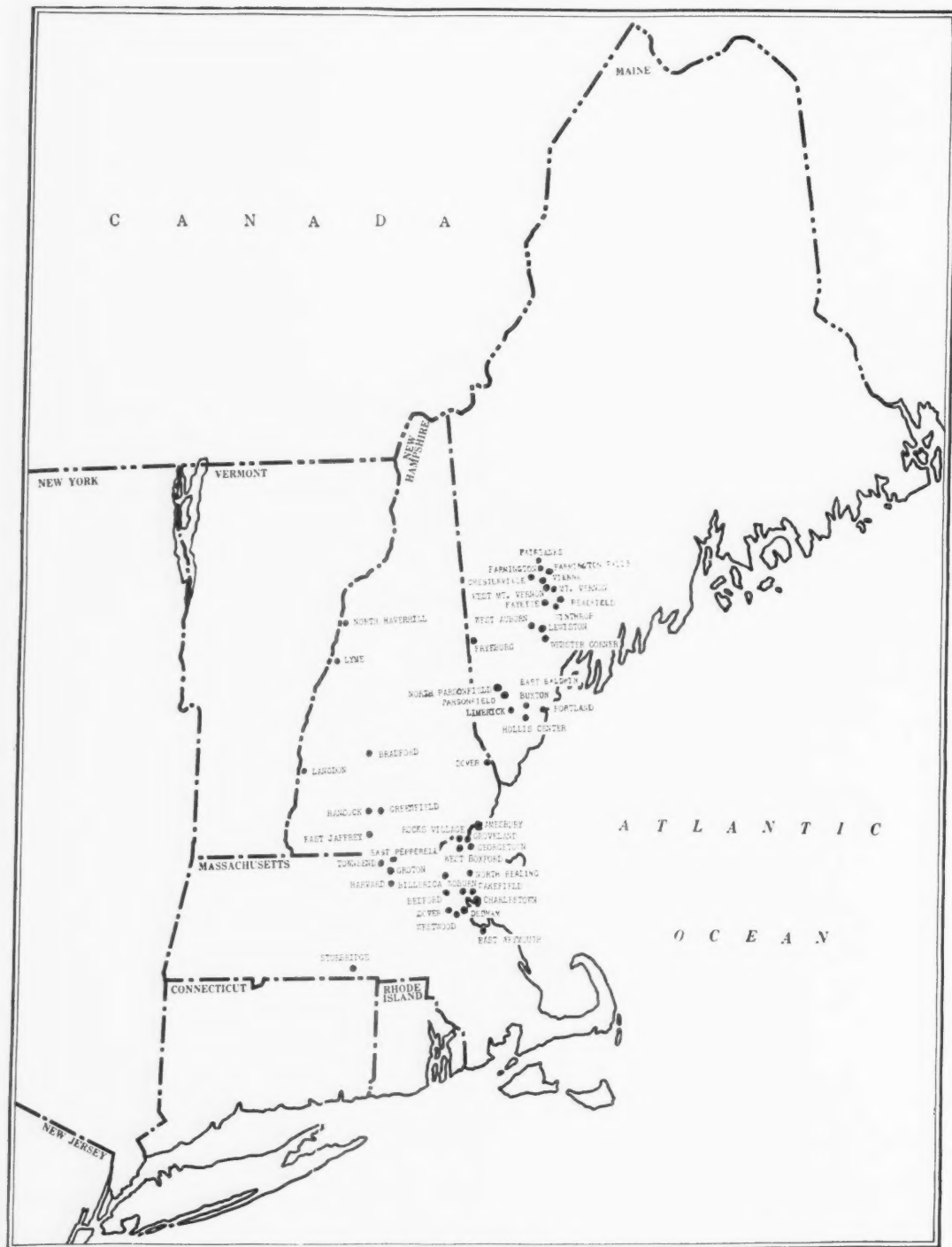
*Miss Clara Endicott Sears has had one of the local murals moved to her Wayside Museums at Harvard, Mass.; and a house in Sturbridge, Mass., containing Porter murals has been bought by Messrs. A. B. and J. C. Wells, of the American Optical Company, for their Old Sturbridge Village which displays and teaches early New England arts and crafts; and Major Goyette salvaged the frescoes from the old Prescott Tavern for his museum at Peterboro, N. H. May these be good examples to our public museums!

is imperative to save them from destruction now and to insure their future preservation.

* * * *

A. J. Philpott remarked in an article written for the *Boston Globe* (July 5, 1936) that Porter was "a Yankee genius, if ever there was one," and that "Rufus Porter was probably the kind of 'Connecticut Yankee' that Mark Twain wrote about." He went on to point out that Mark Twain lived in Hartford for many years and knew all about the "characters" in that part of Connecticut — implying that Porter, who in his late years resided in Hartford and New Haven counties, and who was widely known as an artist, inventor and editor and most certainly a "character," would not have escaped Mark Twain's notice. The Connecticut Yankee's personality and interests do seem sufficiently akin to Porter's to lend some credence to Philpott's interesting hypothesis. Mark Twain's hero, after having practiced several other trades, had gone to work in the great Colt arms factory in Hartford where he began his real career of learning to make all kinds of labor-saving machinery. "Why," says he, "I could make anything in the world, it didn't make any difference what: and if there wasn't any quick new-fangled way to make a thing, I could invent one — and do it as easy as rolling off a log." In King Arthur's court he realizes that he is just another Robinson Crusoe, who, "to make life bearable must . . . invent, contrive, create, reorganize things; set brain and hand to work, and keep them busy." He does just this, modernizing everything in the realm from education to industry, introducing large-scale advertising and the telephone, starting the *Camelot Weekly* as the first newspaper. The Connecticut Yankee, that democratic, wide-awake adventurer, romping through the sixth century promoting and prophesying, inventing, improving, might well have been in part inspired by the life of our bold pioneer, Rufus Porter.

More significant is the fact that Mark Twain's Connecticut Yankee was a great novelist's personification of the tough, free, creative Yankee spirit — while Rufus Porter was a living representative, a living symbol, of that spirit.



MAP OF TOWNS IN WHICH RUFUS PORTER AND HIS SCHOOL PAINTED MURALS

Check List of Frescoes

By Rufus Porter and His School

The frescoes marked with an asterisk are in especially fine state of preservation. Those printed in italics are attributed to assistants or pupils. Unless otherwise indicated the frescoes are in full color.

NEW HAMPSHIRE

EAST JAFFREY

Prescott Tavern, built 1803, recently torn down. Frescoes c. 1824. Removed to Goyette Museum, Peterboro, N. H.

BRADFORD

*Joshua Eaton House, built 1814, and a Masonic meeting place for a number of years after 1818 (note Masonic emblem in overmantel decoration). Owner Mr. William Taylor Morson. Frescoes and decorations by Porter and another painter, probably Moses Eaton, Jr., c. 1825.

LANGDON

Bidwell Tavern — burned. Frescoes c. 1825. Dado gray monochrome, rest in color.

HANCOCK

Frescoes all c. 1825.

*Patricia Holsaert House.

Old Cynthia Porter Weston House, built 1790, present owner Mr. Thorn King.

Frescoes papered over until recently, now in poor condition.

Hancock Inn, owner Mrs. Foster Stearns. Frescoes repainted.

Saunders House, owner Mrs. Foster Stearns.

GREENFIELD

Frescoes all c. 1825.

John G. Tracy House. Frescoes restored 1941.

James T. Garvin House. Frescoes papered over.

Elliot Hutchinson House, built 1773. Frescoes recently papered over.

Squire Craigin House, built c. 1820.

LYME

Frescoes all c. 1825.

*George Wittenborn House.

Dennis House.

Culver House, built c. 1809.

NORTH HAVERHILL

*Daniel Carr House. Wing containing frescoes built 1816. Frescoes c. 1825.

DOVER

Neighborhood House, built c. 1820. Frescoes c. 1825-30, largely repainted.

MAINE

PORTLAND

Deacon John Bailey House, built 1730. Frescoes, c. 1825, recorded as dating between 1815 and 1827.

Ellis Place, Blackstrap — burned.

FRYEBURG

Frescoes all c. 1830.

*Barrows Homestead. Tradition records date of 1830 for frescoes.

Warren Towle House. Frescoes papered over.

HOLLIS CENTER

Quillcote, old home of Kate Douglas Wiggin. Frescoes c. 1830, painted during occupancy of first owner, Jabez Woodbury, between 1823 and 1835. Front hall frescoes upstairs and downstairs practically demolished by early architectural changes; parlor frescoes restored 1919, now papered over.

BUXTON

A. I. Poulsen House. Frescoes c. 1830.

*Carroll Rounds House, former stagecoach tavern. Frescoes c. 1830.

WINTHROP

Frescoes all c. 1830.

Frank Hanson House. Signature "E. V. Bennett." Frescoes varnished and discolored.

Don J. Knowlton House. Signature "A. N. Gilbert."

Captain Samuel Benjamin House (telephone building). Frescoes probably by Porter and an assistant.

NORTH PARSONFIELD

Frescoes all by Paine, c. 1830.

*Curtis M. Sweat House, built 1814-16.

Frank Chapman House.

Helen Cating House.

Dr. William Reid House. Frescoes papered over.

PARSONFIELD

*Old Dalton House, built 1805-16, owner Miss Blanche Marchionette. Frescoes by Paine, c. 1830.

LIMERICK

Frescoes by Paine, c. 1830.

McDonald Inn, owner Mr. C. Sadler. Frescoes entirely repainted.

Furlong House, no longer in existence.

VIENNA

Frescoes locally remembered as by Jonathan D. Poor, datable c. 1833 when Poor recorded as living in Vienna.

Nathaniel Whittier House, owner Otis Foss. Frescoes in poor condition.

Gilman Bacheldor House.

CHESTERVILLE

Frescoes all locally remembered as Poor's work, datable c. 1834.

Diller House (old Benjamin Bachellor House). Fresco signed "J. D. Poor — 1834."

Fuller Dyke House, burned 1905. The late Mrs. Abigail Hodgkins Knowlton remembered that her father had the walls decorated by Poor, and his initials were found on one of the frescoes.

Old Thomas Williams Homestead, built c. 1780; owner Nettie M. Ingham.

Lyman Whittier House. Frescoes papered over.

Thomas Austin House (old Benjamin S. French House).

FARMINGTON

Frescoes traditionally ascribed to Poor, datable c. 1835-40.

John Cushman Farm, built 1830, burned 1944; formerly the town poorhouse.

William Gilman Farm, owner Edwin Rackliffe. Frescoes papered over.

David Ingham Farm, owner Mrs. Lizzie Schultz. Frescoes recently destroyed.

FARMINGTON FALLS

Old Russ House (Jeremiah Stinchfield Store) built c. 1795, torn down 1914.

Frescoes traditionally ascribed to Poor, dated c. 1835-40. Evidences of Paine's collaboration here.

MT. VERNON

Arthur Gordon House. Frescoes traditionally ascribed to Poor, datable c. 1835-40.

WEST MT. VERNON

Frescoes attributed to Poor, c. 1835-40.

Leon H. Marr House, built c. 1830.

Thomas Austin House.

Unidentified House, now destroyed. Photos indicate frescoes by Poor.

FAIRBANKS

Frescoes traditionally ascribed to Poor, datable c. 1835-40. Evidence that Paine also worked in this town.

Milton Gay House (formerly H. A. Compton). Ballroom frescoes by Poor assisted by Paine

Carrie Archabald House (formerly Leon Wright). Frescoes papered over.

Old Benjamin Stanley House, built by Colonel Moore in Revolutionary times; owner Montell Gray. Frescoes, in fine state of preservation, papered over.

READFIELD

Frescoes traditionally ascribed to Poor, datable c. 1835-40.

Old Captain Dudley Haines House, built c. 1790; owner Calvin Norton. Signature "J. D. Poor" on a ship in one of frescoes.

A. L. Saunders House, built c. 1810.

FAYETTE

Old Lieutenant John Lovejoy House, built c. 1795; owner Clyde Wells. Frescoes traditionally ascribed to Poor, datable c. 1835-40.

BETHEL

**Old Dr. Moses Mason House*, built c. 1812; owner Daniel T. Durell. Frescoes in front hall in excellent condition; those in parlor almost entirely destroyed and papered over. Frescoes attributed to Poor, c. 1835-40. An observatory in one of the scenes was labeled "Portland" by Dr. Mason in 1863.

RUMFORD

Phil Baker House. Frescoes similar to those in the Dr. Mason House in Bethel, probably by Poor, said to have been done c. 1840.

BRYANT POND

Whitman Homestead, recently burned. Frescoes said to have been similar to those in the Dr. Mason House in Bethel, probably by Poor, 1835-40.

EAST BALDWIN

Lorenzo Norton House. Frescoes by Poor; one initialed "J. D. P." and dated 1840.

LEWISTON

Frescoes by Orison Wood, c. 1830.

**H. O. Wood House*, built c. 1813; owner Mrs. E. Mechat.

Howard W. Mann House. Frescoes removed from a Lewiston house, now destroyed, and set up in the Mann House.

WEST AUBURN

**Otis B. Tibbets House*. Frescoes by Orison Wood, c. 1830. Parlor frescoes in original condition, other room restored by Mrs. Mary Preble.

WEBSTER CORNER

**Old Cushman Tavern*, built 1826, owner Mrs. M. C. Morse. Frescoes by Orison Wood, c. 1830. Frescoes in one room papered over.

MASSACHUSETTS

EAST PEPPERELL

Coburn Tavern (old Cob Inn), built c. 1800; owner Mr. Thomas Hayes. Frescoes c. 1824.

GEORGETOWN

Frescoes all c. 1832.

C. Arthur Merrill House. Gray-green monochrome frescoes, recorded as done in 1832.

Old Pingree House, owner Mr. Carlton W. Moore. Gray-green monochrome frescoes, restored 1937 by Mr. William Ilsley.

William Tidd House. Frescoes papered over.

GROVELAND

Frescoes all c. 1832.

Old Savery Homestead, built 1825; owner Mrs. Sheldon B. Hickox. Plum monochrome frescoes.

Old Parker House, built c. 1813.

**Harold Stacy House*.

Spofford House. Plum monochrome frescoes, papered over.

Edna Worthing Cottage. Frescoes papered over.

TOWNSEND

Charles A. Smith House. Gray monochrome frescoes, c. 1832.

ROCKS VILLAGE (E. HAVERHILL)

**Ingalls-Colby House*, owner Mr. Harry W. Colby. Frescoes, c. 1832, painted during ownership of Dr. Timothy Kenison who bought house in 1824. Upstairs frescoes gray-green monochrome, downstairs in color.

AMESBURY

**Mary Bartlett House*, built 1809. Frescoes c. 1832.

HARVARD

Frescoes all c. 1832.

Whitney House. Gray monochrome frescoes.

Fruitlands & the Wayside Museums, Inc., Clara Endicott Sears, Founder. One gray monochrome mural from the Whitney house removed to Trustees' Room.

Maddigan House, owner William Potter. Gray monochrome frescoes, papered over.

Gertrude Whitney Sawyer House, built c. 1790-95 (now Howard Inn). Frescoes in center hall plum monochrome, in south hall gray-green monochrome. Wall paper recently removed, frescoes in damaged condition.

STURBRIDGE

David Wight House, built 1787-89. Gray-green monochrome frescoes in hall, c. 1832. Formerly papered over, in very poor condition, recently restored.

BILLERICA

Frescoes all c. 1832.

Ernest Bartlett House (formerly Richardson), built 1822. Frescoes papered over.

Lyons House (formerly Colonel Baldwin), built c. 1810. Frescoes papered over.

Dyer House (old Parker Winning House), built c. 1820. Front hall frescoes whitewashed and papered over. Upstairs room frescoes in excellent condition.

Theosophalus Manning House. Frescoes recently papered over.

BEDFORD

Owens House (old Samuel Stearns Mansion), built 1794. Frescoes, c. 1832, papered over.

GROTON

*Donald L. Priest House. Frescoes by J. D. Poor, c. 1835-40. Hallway fresco papered over.

WESTWOOD

Frescoes all c. 1838, and all probably executed by Porter with the help of his son Stephen Twombly.

*Fred E. Colburn House (old Howe House, built 1820) Frescoes signed "R. Porter" and "S. T. Porter" and dated 1838.

*E. A. West House. Stairway and upstairs hall frescoes papered over.

Abel House (old Guild House, formerly owned by E. E. Baker).

Ware House (old Sumner House).

Allen House — burned.

WAKEFIELD

Frescoes all c. 1838-40.

Winn House, built 1805; owner Mr. E. J. Purrington. Gray monochrome frescoes, restored 1919.

G. K. von Klock House. Frescoes entirely repainted.

Old Emerson House, built 1749; owner Robert N. Duffie. Frescoes signed "R. Porter."

NORTH READING

Frescoes all c. 1838-40.

Van Heusen 17th Century Farms (old Colonial Inn). Umber monochrome frescoes in upstairs room varnished, colored frescoes in downstairs room papered over.

Daniel H. Shay House (old Squire Flint Mansion), built 1713.

Unidentified house on route 28 near flying field. Frescoes papered over, described by Mr. E. J. Purrington of Wakefield.

WEST BOXFORD

Frescoes all c. 1838-40.

John A. Andrew House. Frescoes said to have been painted shortly after 1837 when Andrew family bought house. Doorway cut through hall fresco.

Joseph Burgson House. Frescoes recorded but entirely destroyed.

Old Hovey House — burned.

CHARLESTOWN

Levi Prosser House, corner Austin & Lawrence Streets, built c. 1810. Frescoes, c. 1838-40, papered over.

(Several other unidentified houses mentioned by A. J. Philpott in *Boston Globe*, July 5, 1936.)

WOBURN

Shaker Glen Inn, built 1800-04. Frescoes, c. 1838-40, repainted and varnished.

Umber monochrome frescoes in hall, parlor in color. Two signatures of "R. Porter."

DEDHAM AND DOVER

(E. B. Allen mentions in *Early American Wall Painting* that a number of houses in the vicinity of Dedham and Dover were decorated in the late eighteen-thirties by the same artist who signed a Westwood mural "R. Porter," and Mr. E. J. Purrington of Wakefield heard of but never saw two frescoed houses in Dedham. This writer has been unable to find any trace of these houses.)

EAST WEYMOUTH

Senigo House, owner Mr. Joseph A. DuBois. Frescoes, dated 1845, papered over.

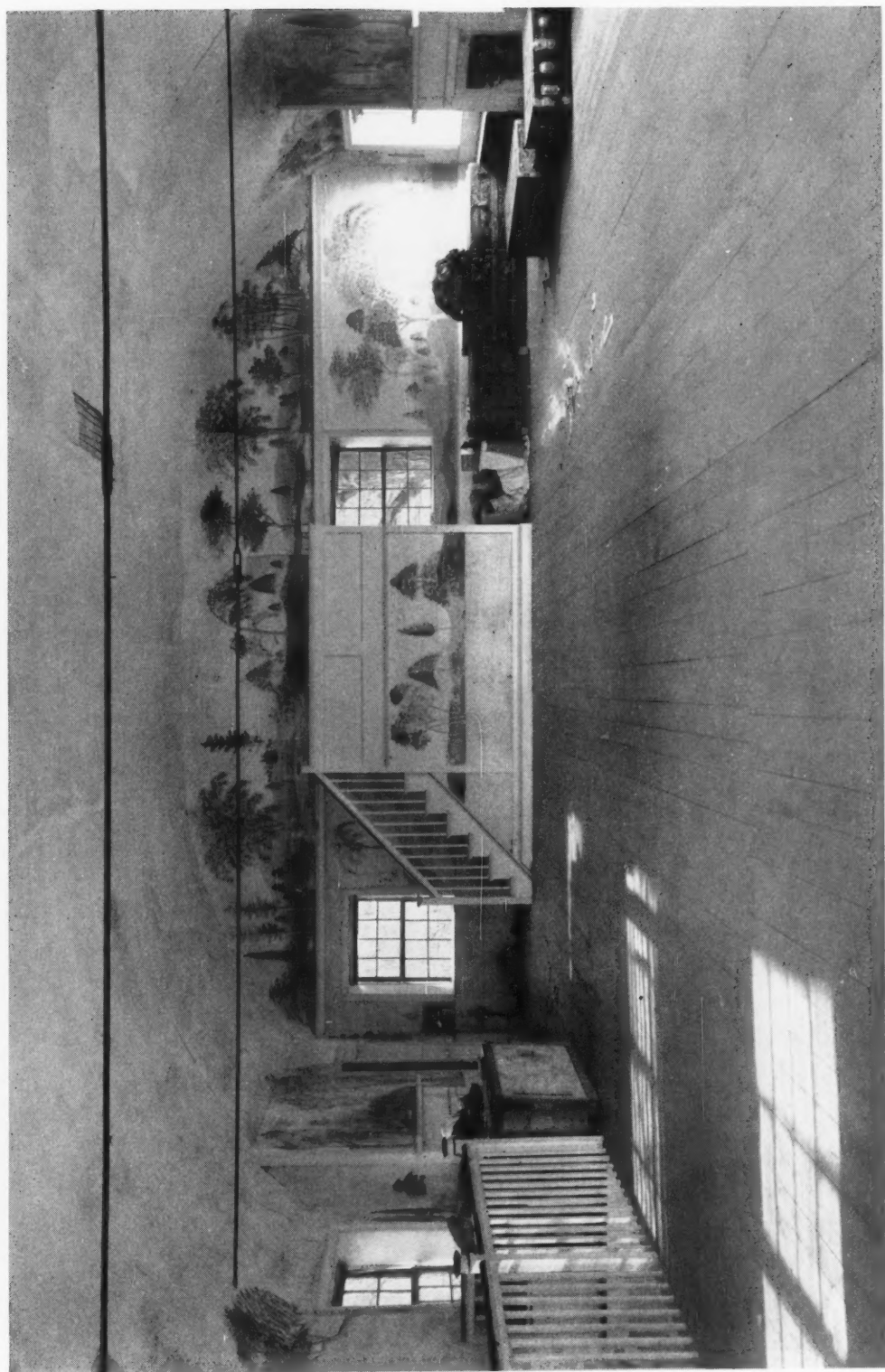


Fig. 1. RUFUS PORTER: FRESCOES IN THE BALLROOM OF THE COBURN TAVERN, c. 1824
East Pepperell, Mass.



Fig. 2. RUFUS PORTER: OVERMANTEL FRESCO, c. 1838
Van Heusen 17th Century Farms, North Reading, Mass.

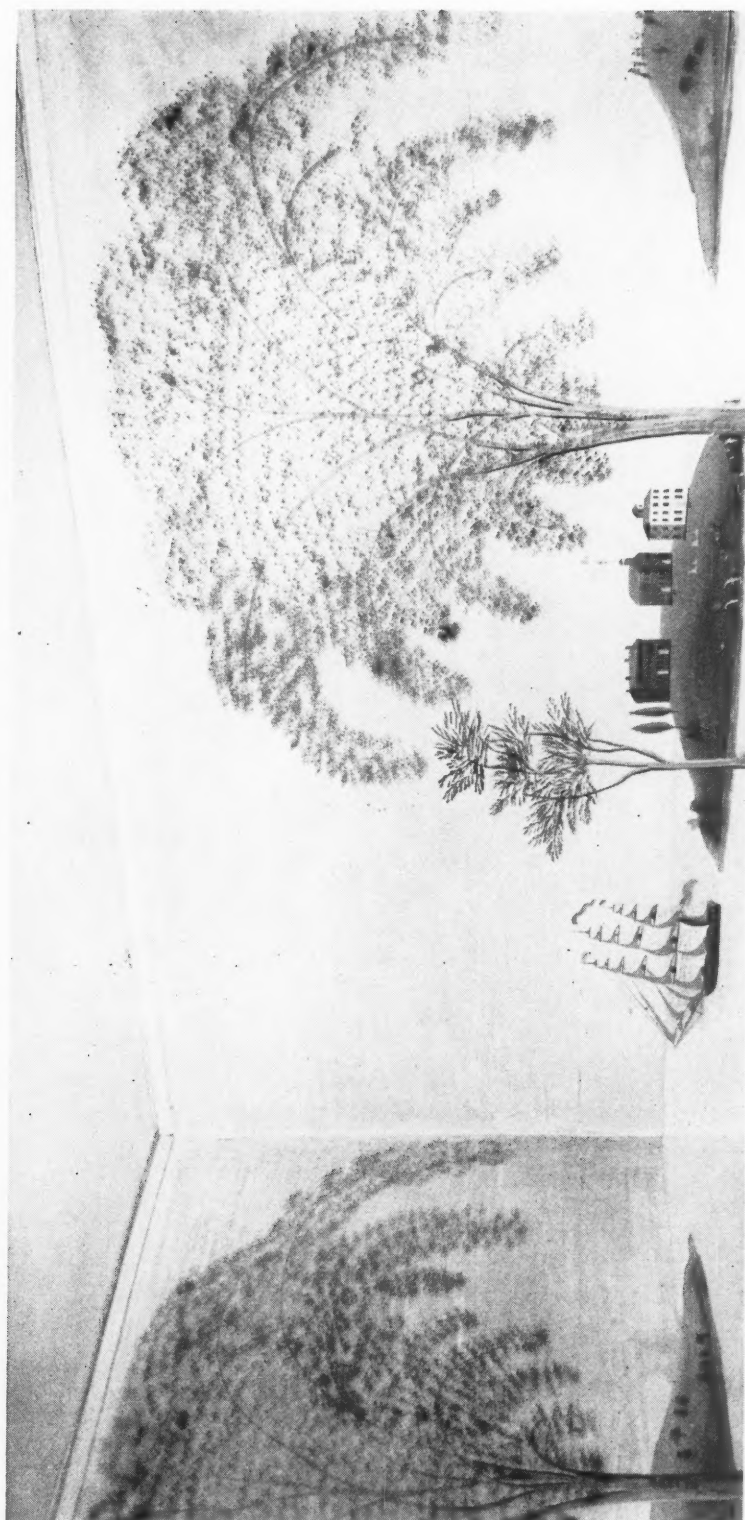


Fig. 3. RUFUS PORTER: HARBOR SCENE FRESCO, c. 1825
Wittenborn House, Lyme, N. H.

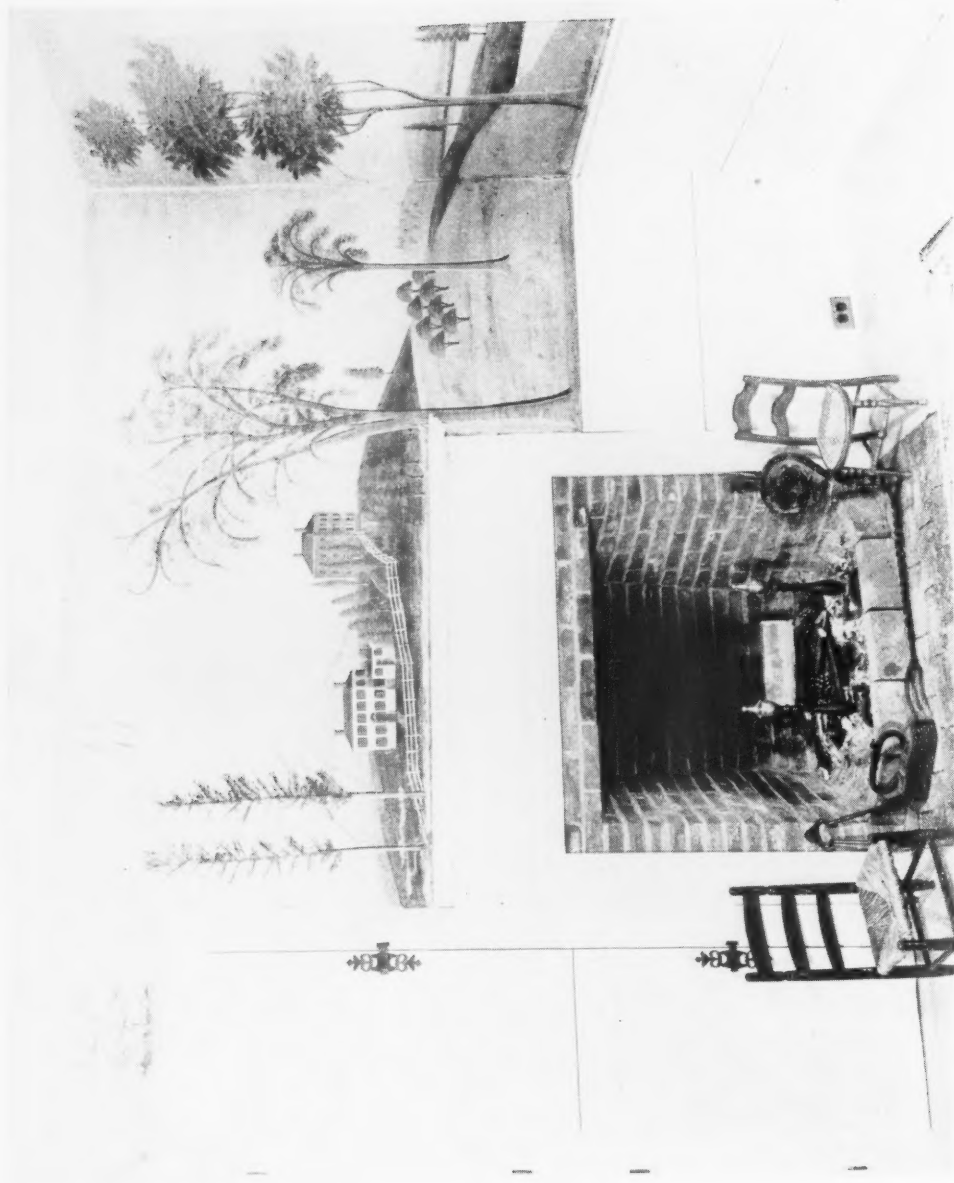
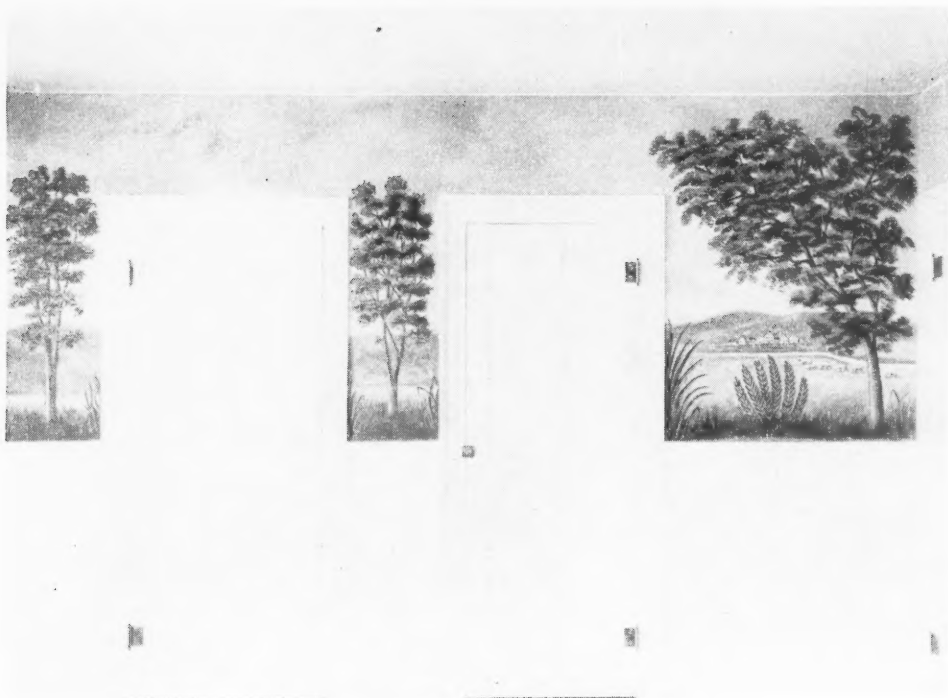
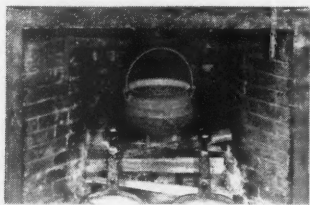
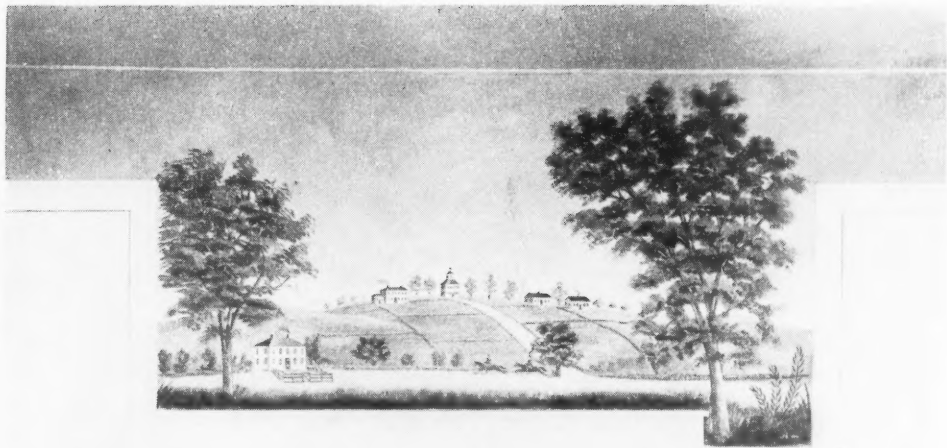


Fig. 4. RUFUS PORTER: OVERMANTEL FRESCO, c. 1825
Holsaert House, Hancock, N. H.



Figs. 5 and 6. RUFUS PORTER: PARLOR FRESCOS, c. 1838
Winn House, Wakefield, Mass.

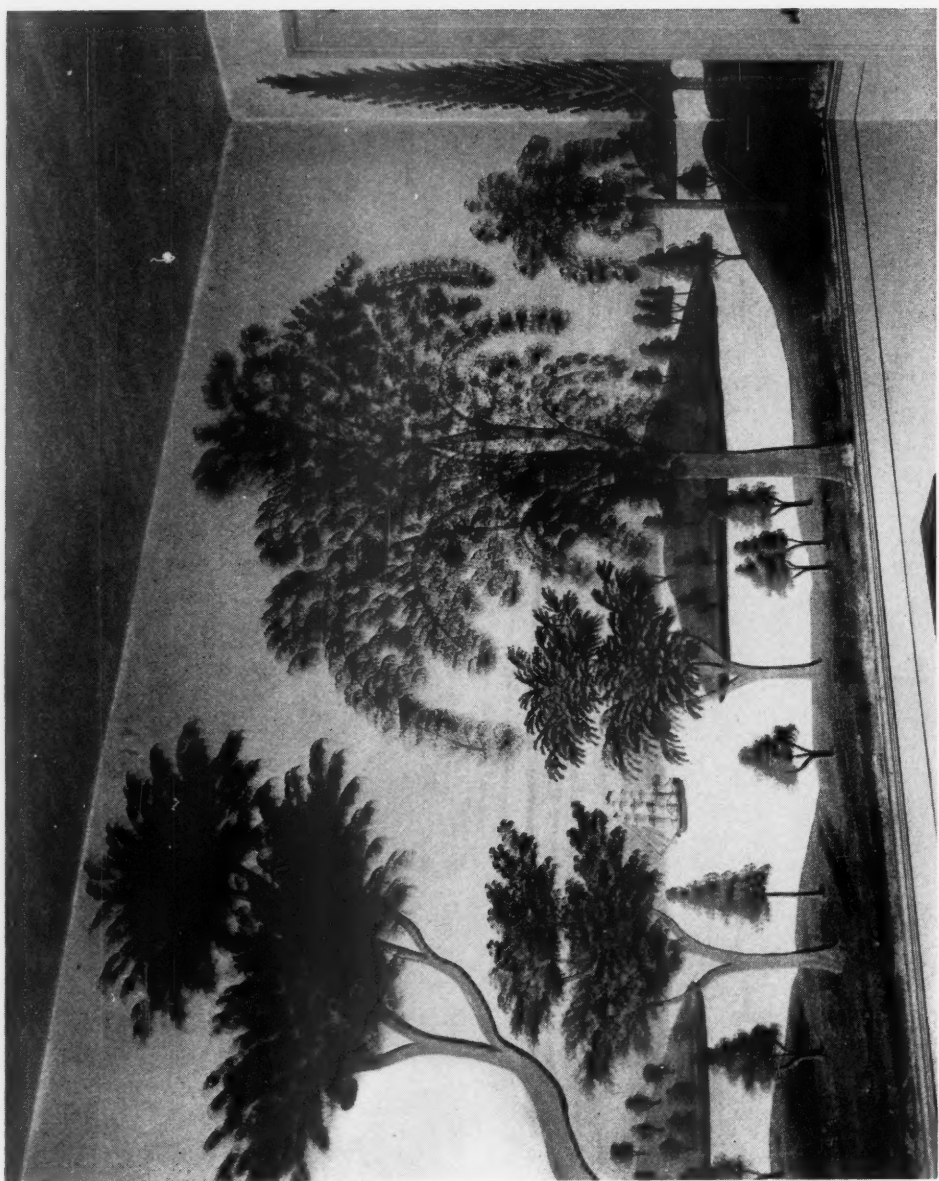


Fig. 7. RUFUS PORTER: HARBOR SCENE FRESCO, c. 1830
Old Barrows Homestead, Fryeburg, Maine

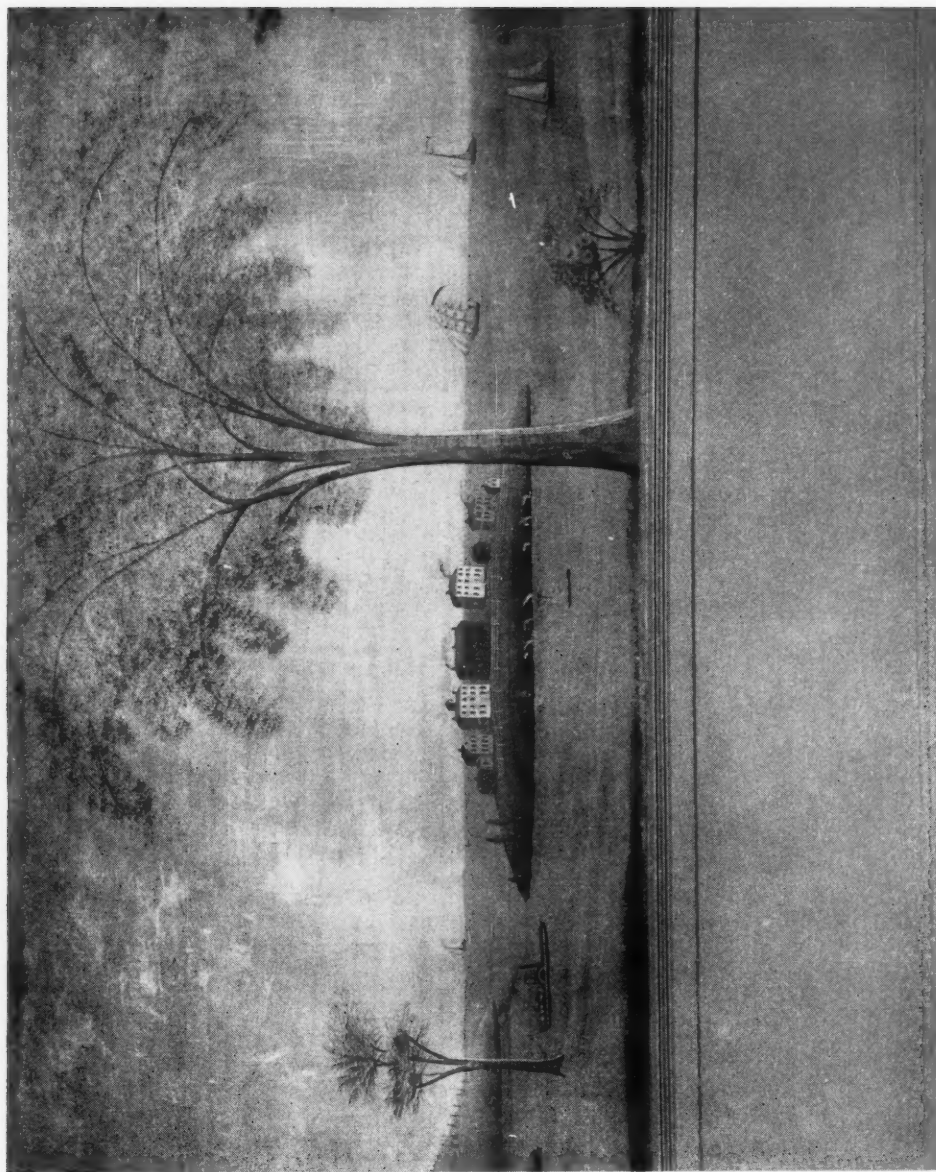
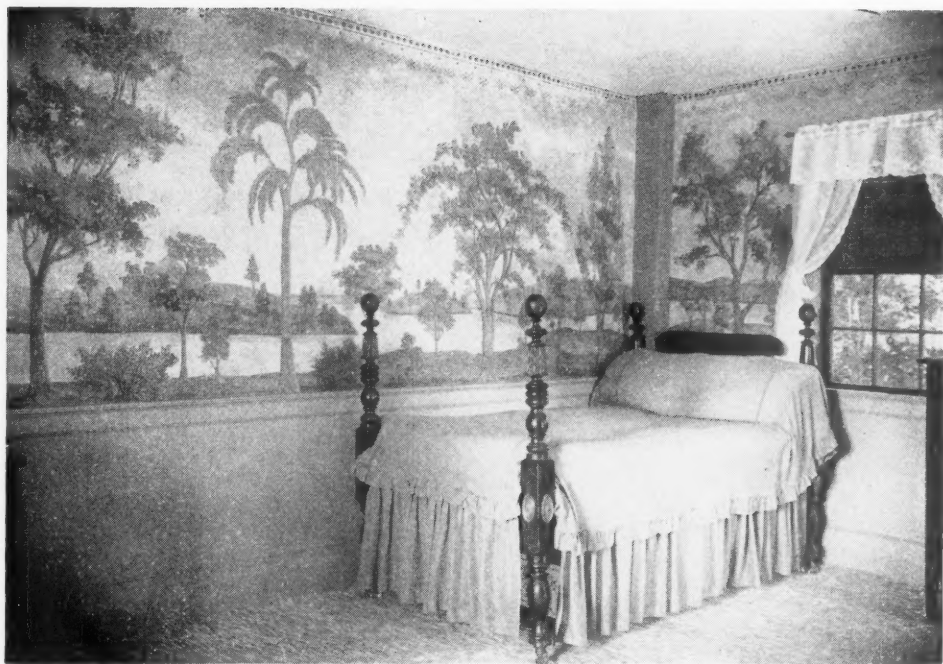


Fig. 8. RUFUS PORTER: HARBOR SCENE FRESCO, c. 1825
Daniel Carr House, North Haverhill, N. H.

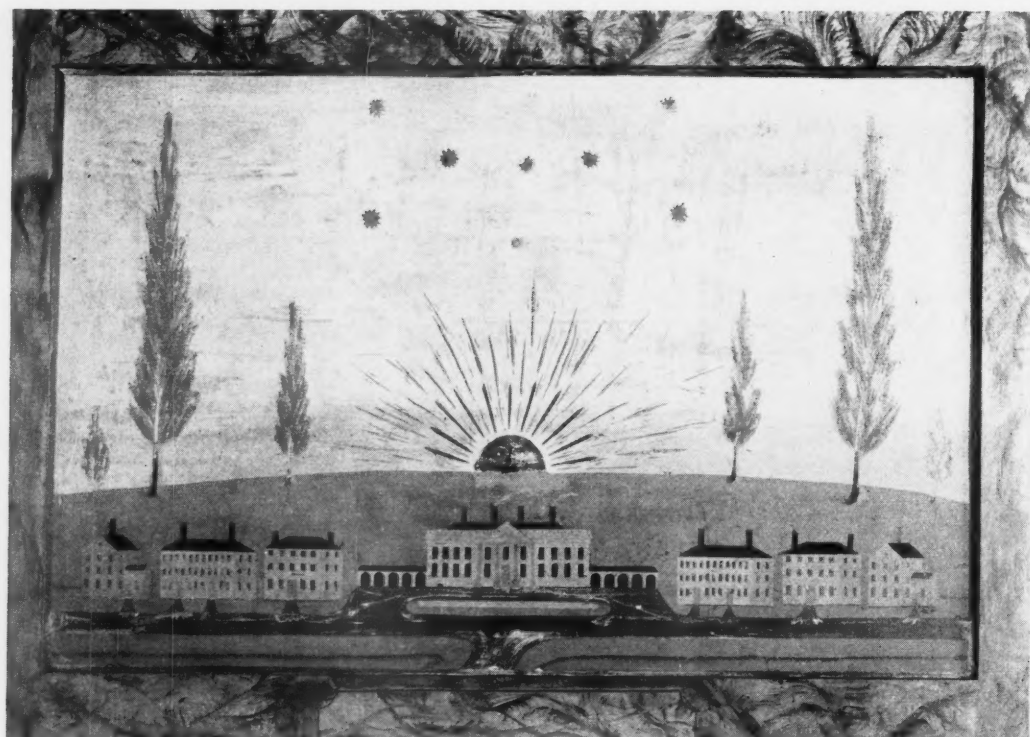


Fig. 9. RUFUS PORTER: HALLWAY FRESKO, c. 1832
Bartlett House, Amesbury, Mass.

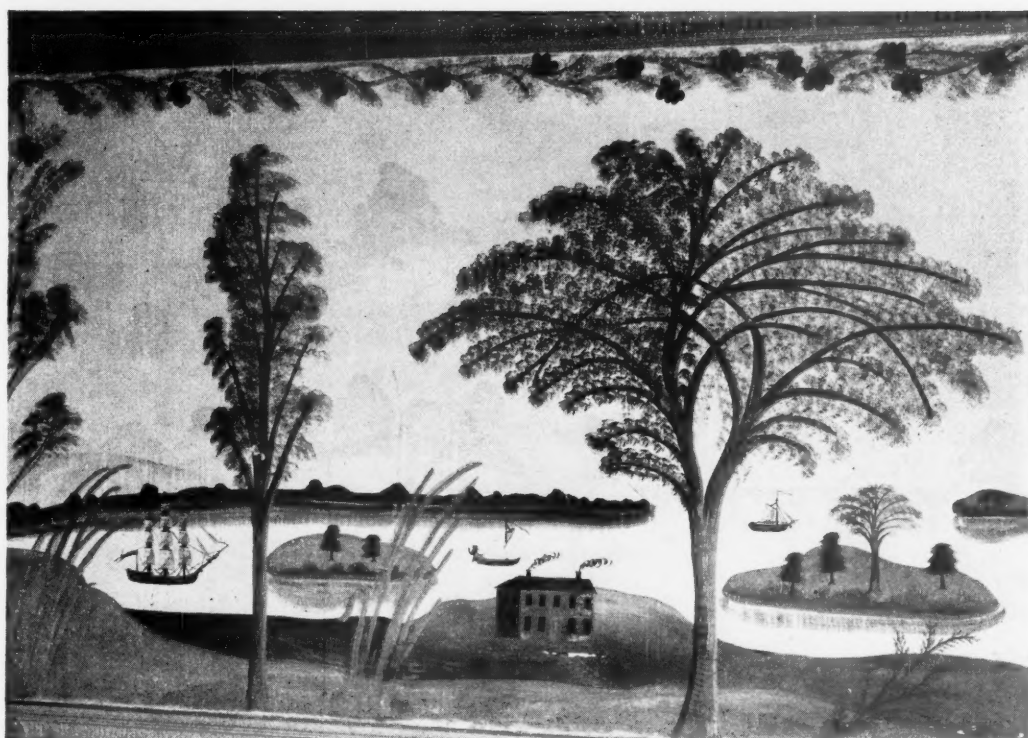


Figs. 10 and 11.

RUFUS PORTER: FRESCOS IN KATE DOUGLAS WIGGIN'S OLD HOME, c. 1830
Quillcote, Hollis Center, Maine



Figs. 12 and 13. RUFUS PORTER FRESCOES:
VOLCANIC MOUNTAIN AND OVERMANTEL OF DARTMOUTH COLLEGE, c. 1824
From the Prescott Tavern, East Jaffrey, N. H., now in the
Goyette Museum of Americana, Peterboro, N. H.



Figs. 14 and 15. FRESCOES BY RUFUS PORTER AND ASSISTANT,
PROBABLY MOSES EATON, JR., c. 1825
Joshua Eaton House, Bradford, N. H.



Fig. 16. BEDROOM STENCILING AND MARBLEIZED FIREBOARD BY "TWO YOUNG MEN" PROBABLY RUFUS PORTER AND MOSES EATON, JR., c. 1825
Joshua Eaton House, Bradford, N. H.

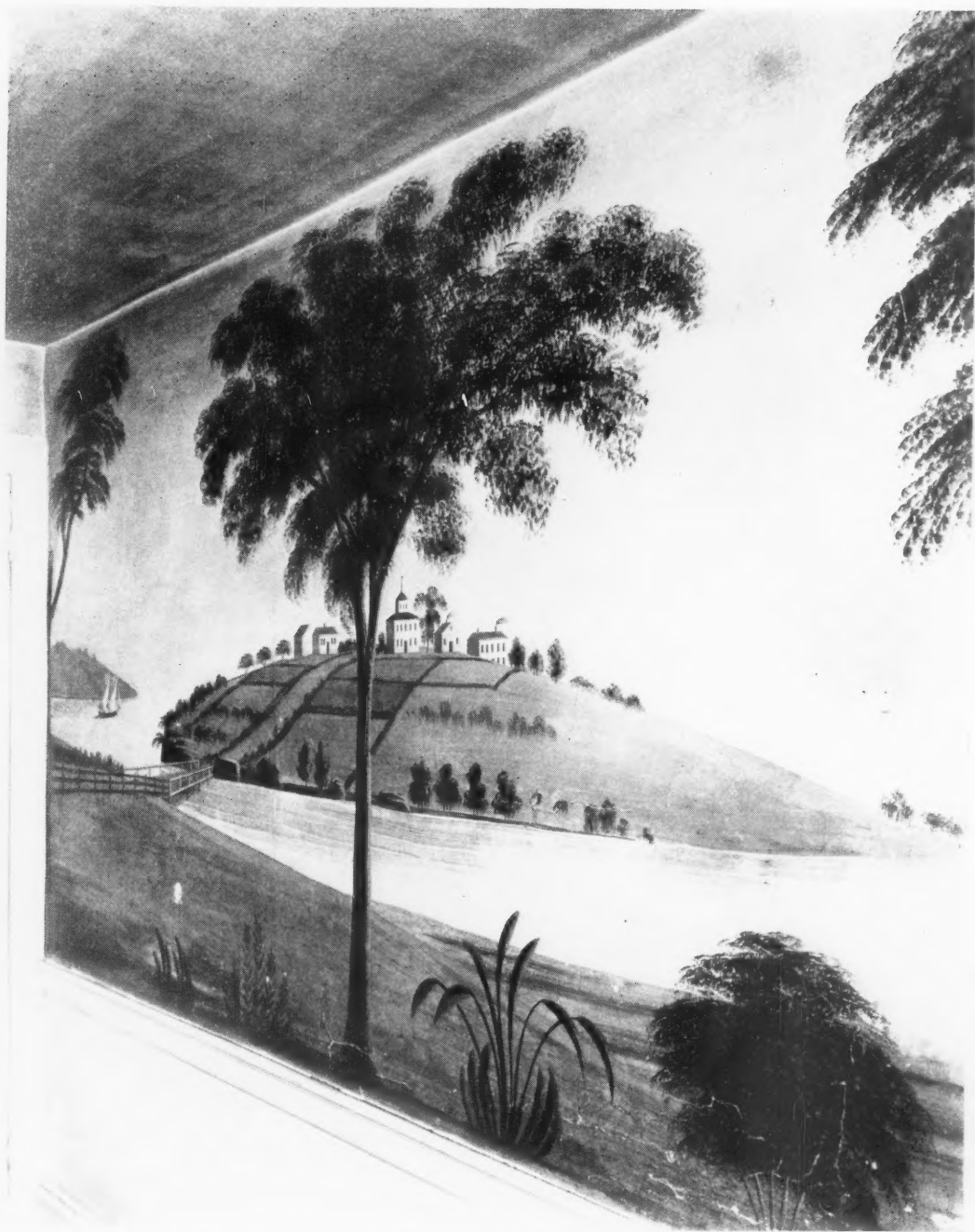


Fig. 17. RUFUS PORTER: HARBOR SCENE FRESCO, 1838
West House, Westwood, Mass.

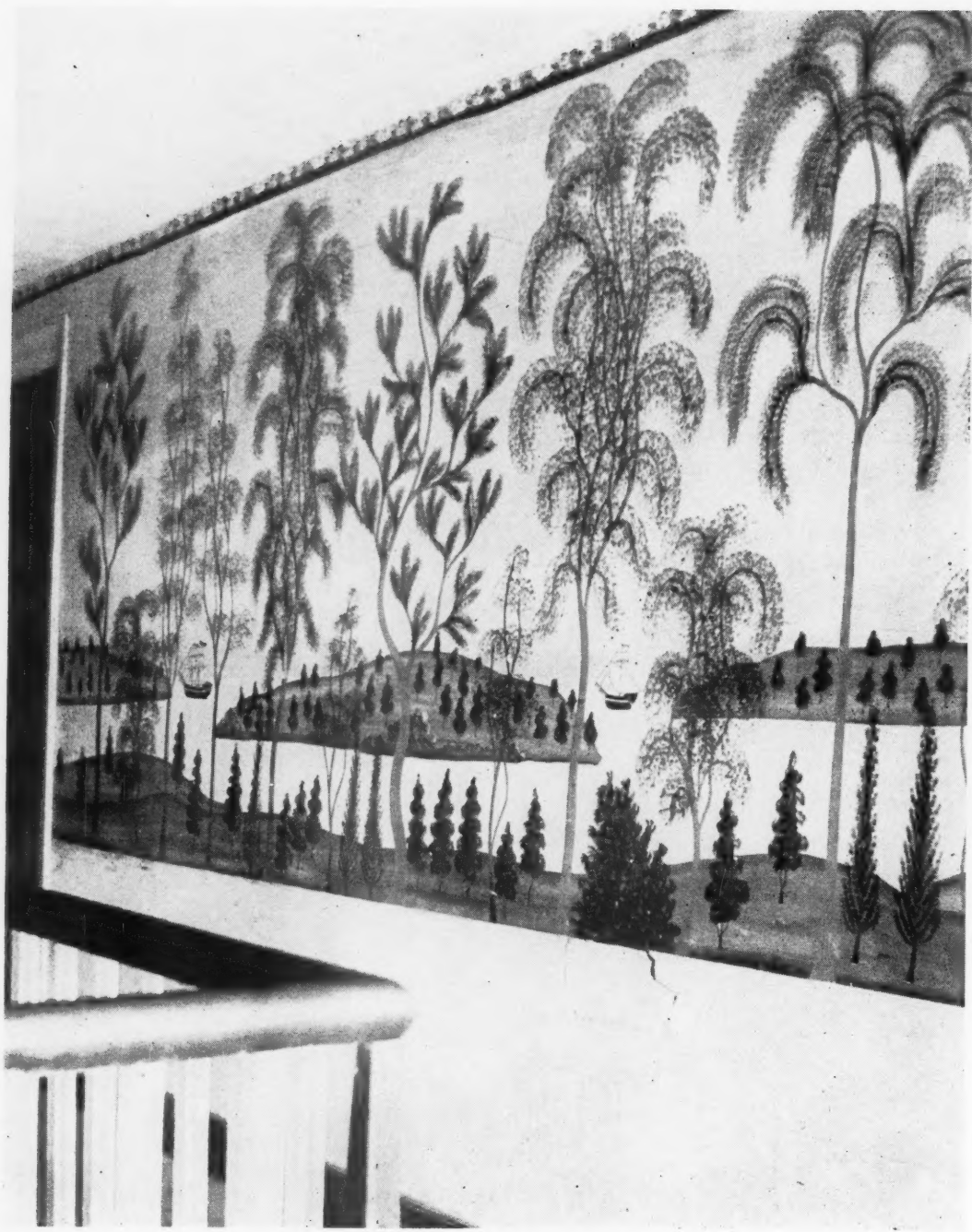


Fig. 18. ORISON WOOD: HALLWAY FRESCO, c. 1830
Old Cushman Tavern, Webster Corner, Maine



Fig. 19. HALL FRESKO BY A. N. GILBERT, c. 1830
Knowlton House, Winthrop, Maine



Fig. 20. JONATHAN D. POOR: HARBOR SCENE FRESCO, c. 1835
Priest House, Groton, Mass.



Fig. 21. PAINE: DETAIL OF FRESCO, c. 1835
Milton Gay House, Fairbanks, Maine



Fig. 22. RUFUS PORTER FRESCO: SACRIFICE OF ISAAC, 1845
Senigo House, East Weymouth, Mass.

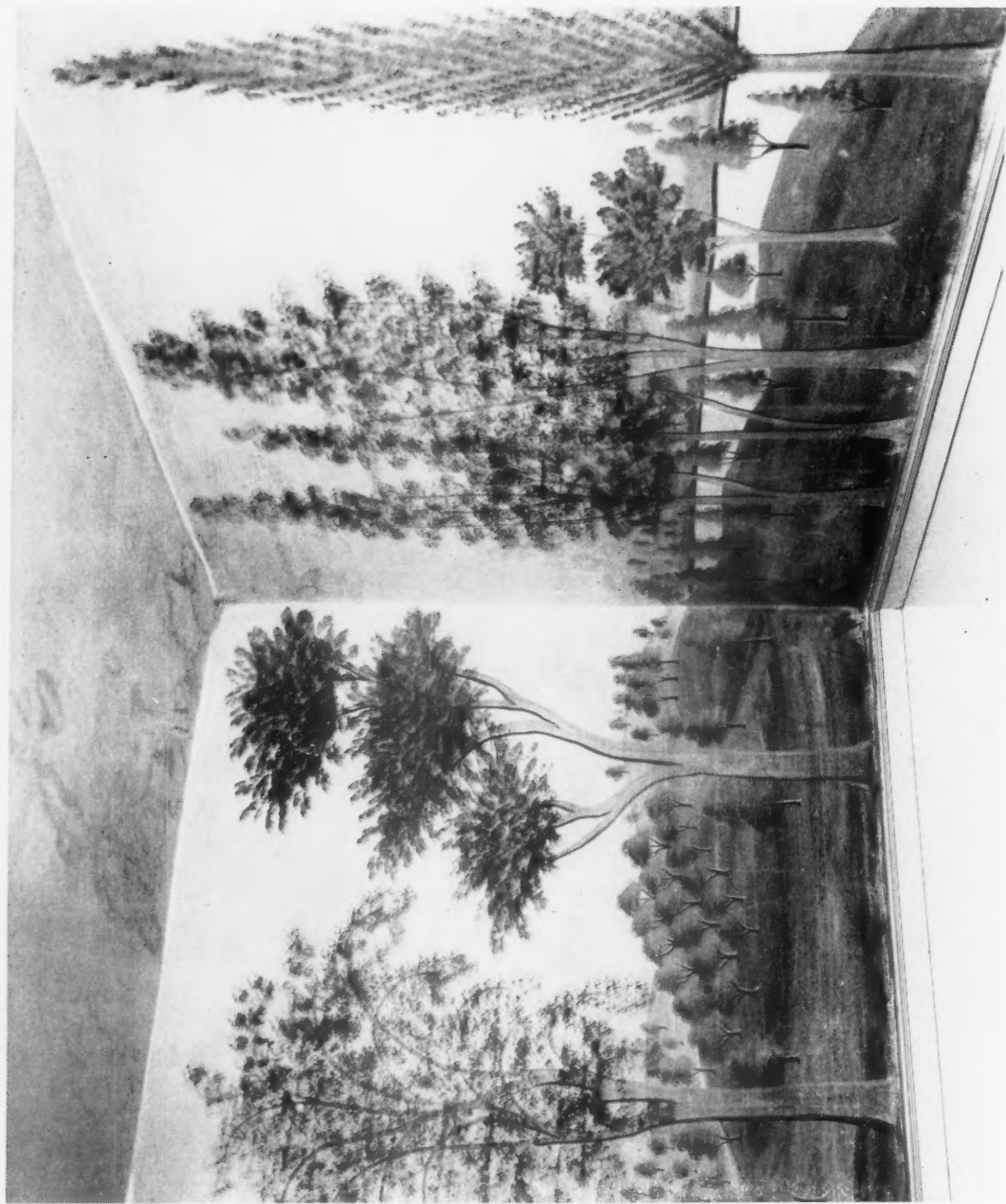


Fig. 23. RUFUS PORTER: ORCHARD SCENE FRESCO, c. 1830
Old Barrows Homestead, Fryeburg, Maine

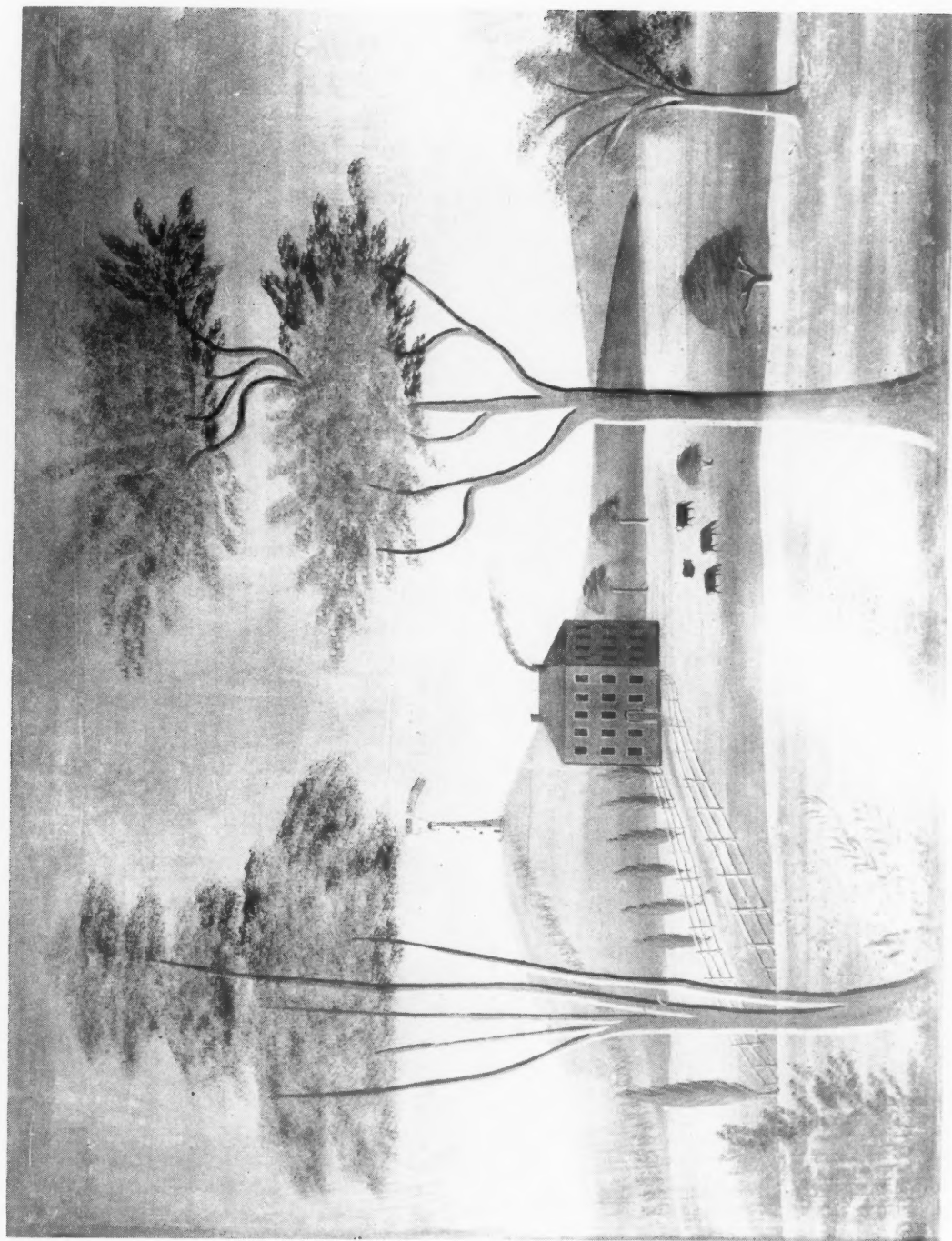


Fig. 24. RUFUS PORTER FRESCO: RURAL SCENE, c. 1825
Daniel Carr House, North Haverhill, N. H.



Fig. 25. RUFUS PORTER FRESCO: HUDSON RIVER HIGHLANDS, c. 1825
Tracy House, Greenfield, N. H.

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